



SARAH BERNHARDT



# SARAH BERNHARDT

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“ Elle restera une des apparitions les plus gracieuses qui aient jamais voltigé pour la consolation des hommes sur la surface changeante de ce monde de phénomènes.”—

JULES LEMAITRE.

“ Avec quel amour Henri Heine eut copié son visage de reine de Cappadoce ou de Néréide, qui fait songer à la nacre de mers, son front étroit avec la peau très luisante, ses sourcils un peu rapprochés et plus touffus à la naissance du nez, ses yeux bleu foncé longuement fendus et peu ouverts, ordinairement langoureux, mais quand elle s'anime, s'éveillant et sautillant comme des diamants noirs ; et cette prunelle excessivement petite, qui, lorsque la comédienne dit un mot ironique, semble se jeter hors de l'œil et vous percer ; le nez hébraïque et pourtant très gracieux par un bridage de la narine, qui semble enlevé par la petite bosse qui est au milieu du nez et qui signifie poésie et lutte ; et, sans oublier le menton bien arrêté, résolu, la bouche gracieuse aux lèvres rouges, très fines, qui laisse voir un magnifique et terrible éblouissement de dents blanches. Et, jusqu'à la fin des âges, toujours l'image de Sarah Bernhardt sera évoquée lorsque Ruy Blas dira : *Elle avait un petit diadème En dentelle d'argent !* ”—THÉODORE DE BANVILLE.



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“Sans doute il est trop tard pour parler encore d'elle.”—DE MUSSET.

## I.

IS it too soon to set down a few thoughts and a few facts about a life to which, still vigorous and capable of fine effort, a term has lately been imposed; which Death seemed to approach so reluctantly and to touch so tenderly? On the other hand, is it too late to try and catch the echo of a voice which, for upwards of half a century, has thrilled the ears and haunted the memories of millions of men and women of every class and creed and colour?

The journalist has been busy, and for the most part admirably busy, with careful *résumés* of a long and laborious career: the “intimate friend” has covered reams of paper with stories, some of which may be

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true, many must be apocryphal. "One Who Knew Her" has, of course, been forward with fragments of personal experience and figments of personal interviews. Special articles have been written, and read, in every tongue and every style ; and people in every capital have felt something like a personal loss.

But, when the chronicler has finally laid down his pen there will still remain a rich field for the biographer to occupy and exploit. He will have much to study, much to examine, much to sift, much to reject ; but there should be little to mask, and nothing to conceal. His opportunity will, perhaps, lie less in any catalogue *raisonné* of dramatic merits, or chronological table of theatrical triumphs, than in an effort to solve the secret of Sarah Bernhardt's supremacy and to explain the magic of her matchless art.

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The writer's task will be difficult, and must not be hurried ; but if it be well done there should emerge a figure to whom the sons and daughters of France will point with perpetual pride, and to whom successive generations of artists will accord a profound salute.

Nearly half a century ago the actress, still in the triumphant insolence of youth, was lifted by a unanimous show of hands to her pinnacle, and through the years her right to it has never been questioned. She stood alone and unchallenged, La Grande Sarah. The traditions of her supremacy constantly hardened, and to have dethroned her at any moment, or for any reason, would have been almost to drag down the drama itself. By what means did she attain her place and achieve her fame ; by what merits did she retain the

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one and sustain the other? These are questions to which the biographer will address himself, and the answers will traverse the whole ground.

Sarah has herself revealed much of her variegated childhood, at first stamped with the pinch of poverty, shadowed by some undefined trouble, undisciplined by parental control.

Like that of many famous men and women, her early life was a struggle, and one in which her fighting propensities quickly asserted themselves. She seemed to have willed her end, and she certainly willed her means. The methods by which, single-handed, she was apt to carry her points show a fixity of purpose, a courage in enterprise and a buoyancy in breasting difficulties in themselves all-sufficient to ensure success. "What does it matter where I was born?" she said to an

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importunate questioner. "What does matter is where and how I shall die." Not that Sarah was ever at any pains to conceal the place of her birth in the Rue de l'Ecole de Médecine or to be reticent about the circumstances of her youth; the mother who roamed the world, but came back to be adored to the end by the wayward child; the nebulous father of whom the child speaks with affection, but who took his paternal duties very lightly; the Jewish grandmother, who took her religion very seriously; the aunts who alternately petted and snubbed their niece; the long sojourn with the nurse; the young sister to whom the elder was a little mother; the school she hated, and the convent she learnt to love, and where—in the presence of the Archbishop of Paris\*—occurred her first

\* Mgr. Sibour, who a few months later was foully murdered.



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appearance on any stage ; the rescue of a little comrade from drowning ; the late baptism into the Catholic Church ; Made-moiselle Caroline, who punished her with a ruler, and to whom in later life she was able to administer a hearty snub ; Mère St. Sophie, who coaxed her, and cried over her, and altogether fascinated her ; the pleurisy which so nearly nipped her career in the bud ; the fits of passion and fevers of remorse, all woven together to make up an experience unlike the lot of most children, but, perhaps, no bad training for a career in which strength of will and self-reliance were to be the main buttresses.

Of many actresses it has been said that they have hesitated to choose between the cloister and the stage. It is not quite certain how real was the girlish desire, of which in late life Sarah often spoke, to take

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the veil, or how far it was the influence of the Duc de Morny, that curious friend of the family, which propelled her towards the theatre as a profession. From the very beginning the drama seems to have beckoned to her, and her inclinations were all, and always, to obey the summons. A visit to the Théâtre Français to witness *Britannicus* and *Amphitryon*—a rather heavy programme for a girl in her teens—and the tears which she shed in sympathy with Alcimene, seem to have determined her; there was no further question of her “getting” to a nunnery. She would be an actress, and her family and friends, perhaps scenting her future, bombarded her with Racine and Corneille, with Molière and Delavigne. She accepted the volumes, but did not even cut them, preferring to commit La Fontaine to memory. She was taken to see M. Auber, the gentle, refined

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and scholarly Director of the Conservatoire. He warned her, somewhat unnecessarily, never to allow herself to get stout, urged her to open her O's and roll her R's, told her that in her new life she must be serious as well as happy, and arranged for her examination a month later. The crucial day came, and was to mark the first of her conquests.

For admission into the Conservatoire, it was laid down that the candidates should propose two comedy scenes, one of which would be selected by the Directors for enactment. Sarah was asked what she wished to play. The reply was that she would recite *Les Deux Pigeons*. "Mais, Mademoiselle, on joue ; on ne dit pas des fables," was the official exhortation. "Je vais dire *Les Deux Pigeons*," insisted Sarah, but in a voice so arresting that the elder of the Directors, her friend, M. Auber, was

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moved to murmur, "Laissez donc dire." Emotion may have rendered the voice specially liquid, determination to be heard may have imparted extra resonance, anyhow, so pure was the diction, so exquisite were the cooing tones, that the Committee surrendered at discretion ; precedent was set aside, and "Mademoiselle, vous êtes admise " fell on ears that, truth to tell, expected nothing else.

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### II.

On the 1st September, 1862—more than sixty years before her last appearance—the posters of the Comédie Française announced the *début* of Sarah Bernhardt as Iphigénie. At the Conservatoire she had passed a good examination in tragedy. She had won a second prize in comedy. She had found a friend in the Minister of Fine Arts, and an advocate in Rossini, before whom she had recited Casimir Delavigne's *L'Ame du Purgatoire*." She was to have her chance.

"I feel that this child will be a very great artist," Camille Doucet had said in reply to Regnier's enquiry about Sarah's Conservatoire training. "The child" was, as a matter of fact, not quite eighteen, a

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bundle of nerves, who, when she left her dressing-room to make her first bow to the public, broke out into a cold perspiration from head to foot, who went to her duties trembling, and with chattering teeth, and was only enabled to pluck up courage to face her audience by the gentle voice of Provost, her earliest teacher; he had come to see his pupil's first appearance, and from the wings gently pushed her forward into the paternal arms of Agamemnon. To say that she got through her part is as much as can justly be said, and the first of Francisque Sarcey's many criticisms ran :

“ Mlle. Bernhardt, who made her *début* yesterday in the *rôle* of Iphigénie, is a tall, pretty girl with a slender figure and a very pleasing expression, the upper part of her face is remarkably beautiful. She holds herself well, and her enunciation is perfectly

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clear. This is all that can be written about her at present."

The second appearance was in *Valerie*, one of the earlier works of Scribe which had been first produced at the Français forty years earlier. Here some slight success was scored, but a few days later Sarcey was disposed to spray the whole company with the brush he frequently wielded to flick Sarah herself :

" . . . Mlle. Bernhardt's third appearance, and she took the rôle of Henriette in *Les Femmes Savantes*. She was just as pretty and insignificant in this as in that of Junie"—in his haste to criticise he had made a mistake, as it was Iphigénie she had played—"and of Valerie, both of which rôles had been intrusted to her previously. This performance was a very poor affair, and gives rise to reflections by no means gay. That Mlle. Bernhardt

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should be insignificant does not so much matter. She is a *débutante*, and among the number presented to us it is only natural that some should be failures. The pitiful part is, though, that the comedians playing with her were not much better than she was, and they are *Sociétaires* of the Théâtre Français. All that they had more than their young comrade was a greater familiarity with the boards. They are just as Mlle. Bernhardt may be in twenty years' time if she stays at the Comédie Française." The sneer at the first theatre in the world is difficult to understand. The "if" about the *débutante* was significant; a coming double event was casting its shadow before.

It would seem that from the first the Comédie was never destined to be Sarah's permanent home, and it is probable that she was temperamentally about as well adapted to its official atmosphere as



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Whistler would have been to the Royal Academy. In a burst of childish temper she slapped the face of an old actress who had hustled her little sister, refused to apologise to the Director or to offer excuses to the lady she had assaulted—threatening rather to slap her again, cancelled her engagement, and left Molière's theatre not to enter it again for twelve years. But the talent, which had won so little favour at the Français, had attracted the management of the Gymnase ; here, if she did little else, she made the acquaintance of that most beautiful woman and admirable artist, Blanche Pierson ; here, again, she was unable to control her feelings ; she broke her contract, borrowed a few hundred francs and bolted to Spain. What drew her there except wilfulness it is difficult to conjecture. It would scarcely have been to study for her profession. The national

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drama in Spain had died out, French plays indifferently translated were the vogue in Madrid, and the notion of "natural" acting—so natural as to be inaudible—had caught on. Sarah lost nothing in training or experience when her mother's sudden illness recalled her to Paris. She now made a solitary appearance, and barely missed a three-year engagement, at the Porte St. Martin where, at the moment, the acting was on a very high level. Dumas' *Vingt Ans Après* had been lately played with an admirable cast, and it was currently said that, play for play, the performance of classic drama at the Français was inferior to the performance of melodrama at the Porte St. Martin.

The Odéon was to give a restless spirit her next chance, and on the boards of the Odéon Sarah made her first "hit" as

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Anna Danby in Alexandre Dumas' *Kean*. The occasion itself was not altogether auspicious; the author, who had embroiled himself in politics, had a very bad quarter of an hour with the students who were gathered in force, and were just then bent on the return of Victor Hugo, but—so ran the notice in the *Figaro* :

“ Sarah's rich voice—that astonishing voice of hers—appealed to the public, and she charmed them like a little Orpheus.”

In after-life Sarah would say that her happiest recollections were with the Odéon Theatre, which she described as a little like the continuation of a girls' school. There was a band of young artists under a very clever and tactful manager, M. Duquesnel, who did not attempt to coerce them, smoothed their troubles, discouraged their jealousies, and encouraged them to be happy in their own work. Moreover, the

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period at the Odéon synchronised with final emancipation from the control of relations and the restrictions of home. Money had come to her, and with it she had rented a little house at Auteuil; her delight was to drive a pair of ponies, harnessed to the carriage then styled a "Duc," to the theatre and back.

The great opportunity was at hand. Francois Coppée, the young poet who, when scarcely out of his teens, had startled Paris with his *Reliquaire*, was about to immortalise himself with *Le Passant*. "I have written a little piece," he modestly told Sarah, "and Mlle. Agar is sure that you will play it with her." Mlle. Agar was then the leading lady at the Odéon, about thirty-five years old, very handsome, but with very little charm, and her young colleague could never understand the extraordinary influence she exercised over

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Coppée. The rehearsals went smoothly; the boy poet proved himself an admirable producer, and the *première* of *Le Passant* was a bumper success.\* The whole house stood up, shouted their applause, and clamoured for the author, who was too shy to appear. The curtain was raised eight times, the one-act play was given "to capacity" for a hundred nights consecutively; Princess Mathilde, the high patroness of art, to whom Agar† was sitting for a bust of Minerva, reported the success to the Emperor and Empress, and a command performance was ordered at the Tuileries.

*Le Passant*, Sarcey suggested, was a

\* Yet it was on this occasion that Sarah for the first—but by no means the last—time experienced the agony of real *trac*, or stage fright.

† Mme. Agar was afterwards twice engaged at the Théâtre Français, but bitterly disappointed at not being appointed *Sociétaire*. Some years later she was stricken with paralysis, and died in something like poverty in Algiers.

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dreamy love duet rather than a play ; very sweet, indeed, perhaps even a little cloying. " Cette saynète a deux personnages me paraît un petit chef d'œuvre de grace poétique et tendre. Un peu trop d'oiseaux jaseurs, peut-être, de près verts, et de ciel bleu ; c'est le péché mignon des neoparnassiens." Sarah, he said, reminded him of Dubois' statue of a Florentine chorister ; she had spoken the lovely verses with exquisite charm ; she had been rapturously and rightly applauded. But—here came the little squeeze of lemon juice—there are points in her figure which do not lend themselves to male costume. The author apparently thought otherwise. " What can I say," he wrote, " of Sarah, so slight, so slim . . . of Sarah, luckily unpossessed of the haunches and thighs which make the impersonation of male parts usually so unrealistic and, indeed,

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so offensive. Of Sarah with all the suppleness, the lightness, the grace of a young man. What admirable talent in both the actresses. What nobility of attitude and gesture, what depth of emotion in my Sylvia—what joy, what folly of youthfulness in my Zanetto.”

Coppée and Sarah had indeed “arrived.” The poet and the two actresses emerged in an equal blaze of glory from the occasion ; for two of them it inaugurated an apotheosis, for the other it, curiously enough, seemed to mark the beginning of a decline.

The theatricals at the Tuileries were in honour of the Queen of Holland and her son, the Prince of Orange.\* The latter, popularly known as Citron, greatly

\* Half-brother to the present Queen of Holland, though some forty years her senior.

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favoured Paris—which he found infinitely more attractive than The Hague. At one time betrothed to the daughter of an English Duke, he was just then a suggested suitor for the hand of a British Princess, and it was in a vain endeavour to draw her son from the boulevards that Queen Sophie had come to the French capital.

The Empress assisted at the rehearsal of *Le Passant*, and, infinitely gracious to the young actress, instituted sympathetic relations which proved to be lifelong. The Prince Imperial made sketches of the costumes, arranged the plants on the stage, and was allowed to come to the rehearsals, being considered too young to attend the performance.\* Queen Sophie—a fond

\* Ten years later Sarah was reciting at the house of Lord Wilton in Grosvenor Square. A telegram was put into the hands of the then Prince of Wales. It was to announce the death of the Prince Imperial at the hands of a Zulu impi.



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mother and rather forlorn wife—laughed and cried ; the Emperor was enthusiastic in approval, and the only mishap at the performance was that Eugénie, having daintily removed her tiny foot from its too tiny slipper, was unable to draw it on again when the signal was given to proceed to the supper room.

It was Sarah's first, and was to be her last, professional appearance at the Palace. Less than two years had gone by before the Emperor had set out on his military ride from which there was to be no return ; the Prince Imperial, a boy of fourteen, had received his baptism of fire ; the Empress was a fugitive refugee in England, and the Tuileries had first become an office of the Prefecture, and then fallen a prey to a howling and murderous mob.

Before the cloud of war burst in 1870,

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Sarah had tasted of personal disaster. The carelessness of a young servant, who placed a lighted candle close to a pair of lace curtains, caused a fire at her flat in the Rue Aubert, which destroyed every stick of the valuable furniture in which she had invested her earnings, and, indeed, licked up everything she possessed except the clothes she was wearing. Her loss was double-barrelled. Twenty-four hours earlier she had postponed signing for a few days an insurance policy which she was negotiating; not only had she no claim on the company, but the company claimed against her for lack of caution which had caused damages to other tenants of the house—the house itself having to be propped up for several months. Forty thousand francs had to be found, and Sarah had neither available cash nor tangible security. Her relatives, some of whom were well-

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to-do, and her friends were not forthcoming. Her admirers were generous in sympathy, but lacking in substance.\*

The proprietor of a well-known hotel offered her a suite of rooms for a month if she would dine every evening—also as his guest—in the restaurant ; a suggestion to which one of her friends furnished a very forcible answer. The insurance com-

\* A great many poetic effusions reached her. One which she specially liked ran :

“ Passant, te voila sans abri :  
La flamme a ravagé ton gîte.  
Hier plus léger qu'un colibri ;  
Ton esprit aujourd'hui s'agite,  
S'exhalant en gémissements  
Sur tout ce que le feu dévore.  
Tu pleures tes beaux diamants ? . . .  
Non, tes grands yeux les ont encore !

“ Avec ta guitare à ton cou,  
Va, par la France et par l'Espagne !  
Suis ton chemin ; je ne sais où. . . .  
Par la plaine et par la montagne !  
Passe, comme la plume au vent !  
Comme le son de ta mandore !  
Comme un flot qui baise en revant  
Les flancs d'une barque sonore ! ”

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pany became pressing, and there seemed no way to meet her liability except to close with an engagement to play in Russia, where she dreaded the cold intensely. But help was nearer than she thought, and came from the hand of the woman whose supremacy in song was the pendant of Sarah's in drama. Adelina Patti, then the young Marquise de Caux, whose name was on the lip of every lover of music, had never sung at a benefit performance. Du Quesnel and Arthur Meyer, the brilliant journalist already rising into celebrity, approached her diffidently, and painted for her the troubles of the young actress. She responded with eager grace. A concert was quickly organised ; " Patti " on the posters caused every seat in the house to be taken ; she was received with a volley of cheers when she came on the stage ; she was compelled to repeat three times *Una*

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*voce poco far* (one wonders how many hundred times she repeated it in the next forty years); there was an uproar of applause when the birdlike notes died away, and a cohort of students followed the diva's carriage from the theatre to her hotel with shouts of "*Vive Adelina Patti.*"

Adelina had plunged into the hearts of the Paris public; Sarah, if penniless, was out of debt.

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### III.

On the 19th July war was declared with Germany. Paris became a scene of seething excitement wholly different from the calm atmosphere which prevailed in 1914—and on the boulevards and in the streets the strains of the *Marseillaise* alternated with the shouts of “*A Berlin !*” A fortnight later illness, with the ugly form of vomiting blood, compelled Sarah to repair to Eaux Bonnes, where she spent six weeks in a fever of anxiety and impotent rage, which must have been highly prejudicial to her cure. The month of August, she hysterically notes in her diary, “finished amid a tumult of weapons and dying groans. The month of September was cursed from its very birth. Its first

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war cry was strangled by the brutal and cowardly hand of Destiny." Truly there was cause for a fiery and devoted daughter of invaded and insulted France to cry out in her pain—not so much for the host of the hero dead, as because a hundred thousand Frenchmen had been compelled to capitulate and an Emperor of France, who had sought death on the battlefield, must surrender his sword to a King of Prussia.

A siege of Paris was imminent, and to Paris Sarah, still weak and ill, returned. She sent her mother, her little boy, her sisters, even her maid, to Havre; she herself stayed to face what might come.

The defence of Paris was being organised, and Sarah bent herself to establish an ambulance. The Odéon, like other theatres, had closed its doors for entertainment, but would suit her purpose perfectly ;

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there she had given of her best to the public ; there she determined to give of her best to the men who had been stricken for France. The Directors gave the use of the theatre, the Prefect of Police, who knew her well from across the footlights, gave her not only supplies, but his own fur-lined overcoat, which she assured him would be most useful for a wounded patient.\* Monsieur Meunier sent her chocolate ; the Rothschilds sent her brandy and wine ; the Dutch Ambassador helped her largely with lint and linen. The winter of 1871 was cruel with cold, and Sarah's heart ached daily for the women waiting in the queues, blue with cold, pressing close to each other to keep a little warmth in their bodies, waiting for the little dole of bread,

\* When she paid him a second visit, she found the kind-hearted official hurriedly putting away in a cupboard the cloth overcoat he had been wearing, for fear he should be induced to give that up also.



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milk and meat which she could occasionally send out to them.

She had sixty beds in the Odéon, and hundreds of wounded passed through her hands to receive treatment during the siege. She had a very small staff; her own cook was installed in the boxes with a range to provide soup and tea for fifty men. She and two friends, Mme. Guerard and Mme. Lambquin, a loud-mouthed but large-hearted actress from the Odéon, served as nurses. Books of account were carefully kept, and the famous surgeon, Dr. Duchesne, devoted himself day and night to the patients.

There is admitted a young German soldier, Frantz Mayer, who had been taken on the ramparts. Mayer accepted the persiflage of his French enemies in the dormitory with grim complacency, comforting himself with the belief that the

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garrison had been reduced to eating rats. His composure was disturbed, however, when he was regaled with the wing of a chicken ; he flew into a rage, and flung the delicacy to the ground. Actually, Sarah had been driven to contracting with a knacker for horseflesh at an exorbitant price. The wing of chicken came from a precious supply of fowls which Sarah obtained before the siege, and was feeding in her dressing-room. “ I let the German believe,” she said, “ that all Paris was full of fowls, ducks, geese, and other domestic bipeds.”

On the 27th of December, the long-awaited bombardment began. At first it was almost a relief to know what was actually happening, but there soon began the pitiful processions passing under the windows of the Odéon, with the dreary cry of “ Ambulance ! Ambulance ! ” The

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hospital flag, too, evidently served for a target for the German guns, and the patients had to be packed in the cellars of the theatre, where the rats tormented them and where, eventually, an inundation of water necessitated their being transferred, some to another hospital, some to a flat, for which Sarah managed to provide the rent.

One night the Brothers from the Ecole Chrétienne came to ask for conveyances and help to collect the dead on the Châtillon Plateau. Sarah furnished two carriages, and went herself. She describes the battlefield as like a scene from Danté. An icy cold night, and only by the light of torches and lanterns could they see they had arrived. At every step, as they passed along murmuring "Ambulance!" they trod on the dying or the dead. She raises her lantern to look at the face of a wounded

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soldier ; his ear and part of his jaw had been blown off. She takes a wisp of straw, dips it in a flask of brandy, and blows a few drops into the dying man's mouth between his teeth. She has often shed tears on the stage ; now she breaks down into sobs from the feeling of utter helplessness to relieve the sufferings, to soothe the death agonies.

Then daylight gradually began to appear—a misty, dull dawn, and the sight became the more dismal when all that the night had hidden in its shadows stood out in the wan light of the January morning. There were so many wounded, it was impossible to transport them all, and many had already died of cold. She was learning at first hand the lesson of pain ; the misery—as well as the glory—of war.

As January drew towards its close there

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came the proposals for peace. The two days in which Jules Favre discussed the preliminaries with Bismarck were not the least unnerving for the besieged in Paris, whose nerves were strained already to snapping point. They knew that mercy was never the property of the Germans. Rumour ran riot, and when the actual figure of indemnity was known—there could be no question of reparations—it seemed to pass the possibilities of the immediate payment exacted under the threat of reprisals, but Alphonse Rothschild footed the bill, and swallowed, at the same time the bitter cup of having to lodge in his country house the conqueror of his adopted country. It was at Ferrières that Jules Favre, most eloquent of advocates, who but a few months earlier had declared that he “would not yield to Germany an inch of territory or a single stone of the fo

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tresses" broke down and sobbed when Bismarck drily pronounced the cession of Alsace and Lorraine to be one of the indispensable conditions of peace. On 31st January French soldiers walked the streets unarmed; Sarah's errand of mercy was over, and she was at leisure to weep for her country's shame.

After the Armistice, another adventure. Sarah obtained passports to seek out her family who, to her dismay, had migrated from Havre to Homburg. The journey took over a week; the railway carriages were crammed, and the young Frenchwoman had to travel for two days in a compartment with seven German officers. The train was derailed, and the passengers must walk four miles in the mud to the nearest town. French and German sharpshooters, marauders and thieves were every-

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where. From Tergnier to Cateau she drove in a gig with her travelling companion, Mlle. Soubist, and in a wood had a personal encounter with a ruffian who was out to strip the half-buried bodies that lay away from the road. Her luggage, such as it was, of course was lost, and it was a physically exhausted daughter who collapsed in her mother's arms; an overjoyed mother, to find alive and well, the little boy of whom she had had no word for nearly six months.

The return journey was easier. Paris was fully alive, but alive with murmurs and discontent. Paris was placarded with many-coloured posters, and the posters containing the wildest harangues. Anarchy and rebellion were in the air. Hymns of hate were heard at every turn: "Down with thrones," "Down with the Republic," "Down with the rich," "Down with the

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priests," "Down with the army." The Germans, who fomented the troubles, perhaps rendered their beaten enemy service by rousing him from sullen torpor and dull despair, but the awakening, for the moment was terrible. Sarah saw much of Gambetta—Gambetta who had proclaimed the Republic when the Emperor had yielded up his sword, and wanted the Republic to fight on even when Paris had yielded up her arms. Gambetta found recreation from politics in talking literature and quoting poetry, and one evening the two played together the scene in the first act between Hernani and Doña Sol. He smoked huge cigars, and Sarah hated tobacco—almost as much as she hated butcher's meat—but somehow Gambetta smoked without annoying her. She saw something of Henri Rochefort, whose wit pleased her, but whose insults levelled at



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the ex-emperor, came amiss. She was a good republican already, but the emperor was down, and must not be struck. And then there was de Rémusat, the refined man of letters, who twice refused the Portfolio of Fine Arts, tainted, it was whispered, with Orleanism, really a more advanced Republican than Thiers, and who was supposed to be to Thiers very much what Colonel House was supposed to be to President Wilson. And then, but this was not so pleasant, there was the new Prefect of Police, Raoul Rigault, whom Sarah, unluckily, had offended. She returned a play of his, a stupid, insipid piece, and when he threatened retaliation, she rang for her servant to show him to the door—him, the Prefect of Police! Rigault persecuted Sarah in the Commune with a hundred miseries. Her life, perhaps, might have been forfeit if the bully had not been

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himself shot—in his death showing scant courage.

Life in Paris was so difficult that Sarah went where a flock of Parisians had gone, to St. Germain. There they were out of touch, not out of sight of the Commune, except when an opaque veil of smoke enveloped the city. Then once more back to Paris. The Commune had been crushed, and everything was supposed to be in order again. But everything in order meant blood and ashes, a bitter odour of smoke, women in mourning; all that had been beautiful, in ruins.

The theatres, which in 1870–71 closed much more generally than in 1914–18, were quick to re-open their doors, and the Odéon was rapidly retransformed and busy with a programme which depended for its merits on a new one-act play, *Jean Marie*.

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Porel, later the Director of the Vaudeville, and husband of that unforgettable artist, Réjane, seemed to miss the poetry inherent in his part, but he was a virile and ardent husband to the young Breton girl, so exquisitely played by Sarah as to attract the attention of no less a person than the great French poet of the nineteenth century. Victor Hugo had just returned from his 'twenty years' exile, and rumour ran high that *Ruy Blas* was to be given at the Odéon. Over thirty years had elapsed since the drama had first been given to the public, and in all those thirty years the blend of high comedy with deep tragedy, written in such verse as only Victor Hugo could write, had been the delight of every aspirant to dramatic distinction. Sarah knew much of the poem by heart—she had read almost everything which Victor Hugo had written, although she had been taught

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to regard him as sadly subversive of law and order—her dream had always been to play the Queen of Spain. Paul Meurice the dear friend, ultimately the literary executor of the illustrious master, proposed her for the part ; Auguste Vacquerie, who was linked to him by ties of blood as well as letters, seconded her candidature. Geoffroy, painter as well as actor, who was being lent by the Comédie to play Don Sallust, backed the appeal. The poet was agreeable, and then Sarah nearly ruined the chance of her life by refusing to go to the poet's house for the first audition. The theatre, she maintained, was the rightful place for the reading of a play, and she wrote delicately, yet illogically, " The Queen has taken a chill, and her *camerara major* forbids her to go out. You know better than any one else the etiquette of the Spanish Court. Pity your

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Queen.” The answer was submissive, if sarcastic: “I am your valet.”

The next day the play was listened to on the stage, and then began a series of rehearsals, at each of which it was a sheer delight to surrender everything to the directing genius of the author—rehearsals which culminated on the 26th January, 1872, in a performance that was at once a glowing tribute to the author, and a glittering triumph for the actress. And when the play was over, and the last echoes of the thundering applause were dying away, there came what Sarah looked up to as the greatest moment of her life, when he, the *maitre*, whose genius ranged and ravished the world, bent his knee, and with words of gratitude kissed the hands of the stage queen.

Hard on the success of *Ruy Blas* came an offer to go back to the Français at a

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salary of fcs. 12,000 a year, a sum which nowadays the leading lady in musical comedy would scorn to earn in a month. The offer was tempting, but Sarah had her doubts and her scruples. She had still a year's engagement to run at the Odéon. Ought she to break it? Would Monsieur Chilly consider raising her emoluments to fcs. 15,000? Monsieur Chilly positively declined, produced a copy of the binding contract, and when the actress decided to break it, and enrol herself again under M. Perrin,\* sued her for fcs. 6,000, and won his case.

Sarcey now suggested to Perrin that Sarah should slip back to the Comédie in some minor *rôle* in a classical play, without any special preliminary advertisement. He promised that he and his brother critics

\* Director of the Théâtre Français.

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would combine to cover her with praise, proclaim that here certainly was the actress of the future, and then leave her to time and opportunity to make good. He thought this would be the better way to establish a great reputation. Perrin, however, who if his heart was on the stage, had his head in the box office, thought otherwise. A flourish of trumpets and a flutter of excitement would—his *flair* for *réclame* convinced him—result in the best returns. Sarah, he determined, must make her *rentrée* in the title part of Mlle. de Belle Isle.

The *rentrée* to the Rue Richelieu, on the 6th November, 1872, was only saved from a positive fiasco by a fine *finale*. Sarcey could murmur "I told you so," to Perrin, and some such part as Aricie, in *Phédre*, would certainly have been a safer card to play for the occasion. But the famous

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critic was curiously amiss in his surmise as to the new *pensionnaire's* capabilities.

He wrote, after a not very flattering reference to the actress's personal appearance: "She went through the first three acts with a convulsive tremor, and we recognised the Sarah of *Ruy Blas* only by two couplets which she gave in her enchanting voice with the most wonderful grace; but in all the more powerful passages she was a failure. I doubt whether Mlle. Sarah Bernhardt will ever, with her delicious voice, be able to render those deep, thrilling notes, expressive of paroxysms of violent passion, which are capable of carrying away an audience. If only nature had endowed her with this gift, she would be a perfect artiste, and there are none such on the stage. Roused by the coldness of her public, Mlle. Sarah Bernhardt was entirely herself in the fifth



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act. This was certainly our Sarah once more, the Sarah of *Ruy Blas*, whom we had admired so much at the Odéon."

The early flatness and the sudden fire which marked the impersonation of *Made-moiselle de Belle Isle*, were due, not to the demon of stage fright, but to the pangs of filial anxiety. Five minutes after she came on the stage, Sarah had seen her mother leave her seat in the balcony, apparently suffering from one of the heart attacks to which she was prone. Messengers were sent one after another to her home, but Sarah, who dreaded the worst, could get no news until during the interval after the fourth act, when she heard that her parent was in no immediate danger. It was then too late to make anything like full amends, and for once—and perhaps only once—the actress had been unable to get inside the character she had to play.

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She must have tasted—and she probably never forgot the taste—what artists have to suffer when their private griefs cut irresistibly across their stage parts. But if Mlle. de Belle Isle sadly let her representative down, Andromaque, Octave Feuillet's Dalila, a part in which she followed, and easily outstripped both Mme. Fargueil and Mme. Favart—Berthe de Savigny in *Le Sphinx*, and especially the title part in *Zaire*, served successively and increasingly to raise her in popular favour and what she esteemed far more highly, in artistic esteem. *Zaire*, besides winning her a success of first-rate importance, served to assure her that her vitality was a talent with which she could scarcely over-trade, and that her recuperative powers were such that the exhaustion of one moment would spell the exhilaration of the next, and that her vocal cords were

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proof against any test she might choose to impose on them. Sarah was not particularly attracted towards *Zaire*, and indeed had no great regard for Voltaire's poetry ; also she understood that the piece was going to be somewhat meagrely mounted. Before the play was put in rehearsal, she had begged for a short holiday ; the summer heat had tried her severely, and her physician was disposed just then to shake his head over her symptoms. A month's complete rest at the seaside was urgently prescribed. But Perrin was obdurate ; the discipline of the theatre must be maintained ; its requirements were the first consideration ; he could see no reason to grant a holiday, and he certainly proved to be a better judge of his distinguished *employée's* physical resources than either herself or her doctor.

Mlle. Sarah, he insisted, must play

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Zaire when called upon, even though she played it in the "dog days." Sarah persuaded herself that Perrin, having failed to tame her spirit, was disposed to quench it altogether. She made up her mind that he wished to compass her death under sensational conditions, and she was prepared to indulge him, and at the same time do him irreparable injury. As a child she had on one occasion attempted suicide by swallowing some of the contents of an ink-pot, as a protest against the too frequent administration of a *panade* ; \* now she would rush on death in the full exercise of her art,—and, incidentally, she would pay out Perrin. The evening of the 6th August was tropical in temperature ; actors and audience alike were moist with heat and half-stifled for want of air. Sarah took

\* A sop given to French children, consisting of bread stewed in sugared water.

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her fate in her hands ; she summoned all her reserves of strength, and strained every nerve in her slender body. She sobbed, she strove, she suffered, she did everything except scream ; she was sure that her blood-vessels would break, and that this time death would be no stage device, and that “*je me mœurs, oh, mon Dieu*” would be a true statement ; she let the dagger of Orosmane actually strike into her breast, and at the end she sank back, at full length on the oriental divan, in what she thought were her expiring throbs. But to her intense surprise, when the curtain rose to the acclamations of the perspiring and panting audience, she, too, rose, without difficulty, received the plaudits without languor, and retired to her *loge* without feeling the slightest ill-effect from the desperate realism she had lent to what she proposed should be her last appearance.

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If Voltaire served to affirm Sarah's physical powers, Racine was to set a seal to her artistic fame. As so often happens, the great opportunity arose unforeseen, and through the default of a colleague. It had been arranged that Mlle. Rosalie Roussell should play *Phédre* on Racine's *fête* day. Mlle. Roussell, like Sarah, had quitted the Théâtre Français, had been received back, and was going again to shake off its dust. Her relations with the Directors were just then somewhat strained, she had no mean idea of her own merits, and she was demanding, as her due, to be placed at once on the select roll of *Sociétaires*. The Committee recognised her talent, and were prepared to reward it, but refused to have their hands forced. Mlle. Rosalie declined to yield her point, and the upshot of an acrimonious discussion was that *Phédre* was billed for the 21st

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December with Sarah Bernhardt in the title part. Sarah must now measure herself with Rachel and on Rachel's special terrain, and one may fairly submit that posterity, not, perhaps, without hesitation, has given its final decision in favour of Sarah. In *Phédre*, the two French actresses must also challenge internationally Matilda Heron, Ristori, Seebach, Janauschek, and last, though far from least, the exquisite Polish artist Modjeska. To each of these posterity has also carefully assigned her place which future generations will be unwilling to disturb. Each of them has some claim to special excellence, but it may be thought, without depreciating their several merits, that it remained for Sarah, who was the first to recognise romance in Voltaire, to be the first also to expose, in all their beauty, the more subtle secrets of Racine's verse and

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to clothe them with the matchless music of her voice. The tragedy, like others from the same pen, is less rich in dramatic situations than in dialogue, and more especially in the soliloquy so dear to the stage of bygone days, so damned by the stage of to-day. Apart from the unsavouriness of the dominant subject, *Phédre* was for some time thought unsuitable—because, in a sense, too unwieldy—for dramatic representation. To Sarcey is charged the saying that Racine was not altogether “*un homme de théâtre.*” It is one of the brightest jewels in Sarah’s crown that she, at once and for all time, belied this dictum. Her *Phédre*, her *Athalie*, her *Andromaque*, combined to show that Racine can be placed second to none—provided his interpreters do him justice—in the essential dramatic sense necessary to link up the spectator with



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the artist. On this December night in 1874, Sarah's cup of success was filled to the brim. It was an occasion of crucial importance, and one from which her future ascent was made safe. Much had been expected of her, and she went far beyond expectation. She would have nothing of the Greek ideal that Phédre was naturally a noble woman whom Aphrodite has determined to destroy, and who is propelled to her fate by the goddess's decree ; but she did not forget to temper the strength of her love with its very helplessness. The alterations of self-reproach with explosive protest were made with an intensity of power of which even she had scarcely believed herself possessed. Her passion seemed to sustain her even while it consumed her. The " *C'est toi qui l'a nommé* " was uttered with a terrible mixture of triumph and self-loathing, and her grief

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and her horror of herself were so poignant as to turn—for those who heard the agonised tones—horror for the sin into something like pity for the sinner. It was, indeed, a night of triumph, and on the morrow the Press was unanimous in eulogy, while the Directors of the Théâtre Français, eager to lock up their treasure, hastened to inscribe Sarah's name among the *Sociétaires*.

After *Phédre*, came the Marquis de Bornier's *Fille de Roland*; here Sarah carried her point in retaining a scene which Emile Augier vigorously condemned, and for which the author had vainly pleaded, until the actress pledged herself to create a sensation with it, a pledge she entirely kept. The *Fille de Roland* was a "patriotic" play in verse, so patriotic that it caused comment in the Chamber,

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and barely escaped protest from the German Ambassador; while, in 1888, *Mahométe*, by the same author, was condemned at the representations of the Representative of the Porte. Sarah had shown her patriotism in the ambulance and on the battlefield, now she would voice it in her own domain. Forty years later she would lift her voice again in the same sacred cause and thrill her hearers with *Les Cathédrales*. Then came *Gabrielle*, a play by Augier, which Sarah disliked nearly as much as she did the author; then *L'Etrangère*, where at rehearsals a pretty plot was hatched—but happily failed—to foster a quarrel between Sophie Croizette and Sarah Bernhardt, who were friends in childhood before they were colleagues at the theatre. Then Sarah secured—it would be ungracious to say snatched—a modest success in sculpture.

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She was a little out of sorts with the theatre. Perrin, she thought, was on her track; Croisette, she was sure, was on her nerves. She betook herself to her studio, and only came to the theatre when absolutely required, leaving it the moment she was free. In the Baie des Trépassés she had spoken with an old Breton woman who had lost two sons in the war and her other three by drowning. The old woman had brought up her little grandson away from the coast, and had tried to teach him to hate the thought of the sea; but the call of the ocean was in the child's blood. He falls sick, and persuades the grandmother to take him to the seaside, where alone he will get well. The boy paddles out into the water, and disappears beneath the waves. The old woman goes crazy with grief, and Sarah watches her, bowed and withered, in her long brown cape and

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hood, coming every day to the water's edge, and throwing in morsels of bread, and saying to the receding tide, " Carry that to my little lad." The story gripped the emotional artist ; she must translate the subject into stone—an old woman holding a dead child on her knee. With some difficulty she found the model for the old woman, and gave herself to her modelling, often spending the night in her studio with an elaborate arrangement of wax candles, to throw light on the work. She had her reward ; the group was exhibited in the Salon in the spring of 1876, and although criticisms were levelled at the sculptress for her evident lack of experience in anatomy, she received honourable mention. The tragedy of the old Bretonne gave Sarah another idea. A few weeks after she had distinguished herself in the Salon there was a reading of Parodi's play, *Rome Vaincue*, at the Comédie.

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The subject of the play was the guilty love and consequent punishment of a vestal virgin who had broken her vow of chastity. Sarah asked that this character might be enacted by the beautiful Mlle. Dudley, she herself preferring to represent Posthumia, the girl's grandmother, an aged blind woman. The choice of what, at first sight, might have seemed the part of a crouching, croaking old beldame was curious, but was justified to the hilt. The facial make-up was marvellous, and the sides of the great cloak, which fell away when her arms were extended, suggested the wings of a huge and sinister bat. In the last act, the vestal virgin has been condemned to be buried alive with one loaf of bread and a jug of water to prolong the agony of starvation. To save her from the horrible torture, the grandmother hands her a knife with which to stab herself. The victim's hands are tied.

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The old woman unloosens the girl's white robe, and runs her fingers over the bare breast to find the spot beneath which lies the heart. "C'est bien là ton cœur. Mon enfant, mon enfant!" and the dagger is plunged home. The audience on the first night was as if electrified, and to those who, like the present writer, saw the play, although nearly half a century has elapsed, Sarah's whispers, Sarah's gestures, and Sarah's hoarse cry in this grim episode must be burnt into memory. In the final scene the corpse of the girl has been laid in a large and lonely tomb; the stage is empty except for the old woman, who rises from where she is crouching in the corner, slowly and silently feels her way to the tomb, climbs the steps which lead up to it, beats gently on the door, and then again, the whisper which could be heard right across the house: "*Opimie, ma fille, ne me*

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*laisse pas seule. Ouvre donc Opimie, c'est ton aieule,*" and Sarah seemed to disappear into the shadow of the grave as the curtain came slowly down. The play was a little heavy in the earlier parts, and proved only a *succès d'estime*, although Sarah herself revived it for a special function twenty years later; but the author attributed all the success which attended it to the interpretation of the actress, which far surpassed in subtlety and power anything he had been able to anticipate or conceive.

"MADAME,—You have been great and charming; you have moved me—me, the old man; at one part when the public, whom you had enchanted, cheered you, I wept. This tear which I shed for you, and through you, I place at your feet."



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The letter was from Victor Hugo, the tear was a diamond drop\* hanging from a thin gold bracelet; the occasion was the revival—after ten years on the shelf—of *Hernani*, in November, 1877. *Hernani*, with the delights of daily visits to the *maître*, with Mounet Sully in his very prime and at his very best to replace Delaunay, who had been physically and temperamentally ill-fitted with the character of the bandit; with Worms to display all the beauty of his diction as Charles Quint; with Sarah as Doña Sol,† a part in which her feminine graces had perhaps their fullest and most delicate play, a part in which she

\* Some years later Sarah lost the diamond at the house of Mr. Sassoon. Her host, hearing of this, sent her a magnificent jewel. Sarah declined it—there could be no substitute for Victor Hugo's tear.

† The next year, during the Great Exhibition, an enthusiastic aeronaut named his balloon *Dona Sol*, and persuaded Sarah to make an ascent. She risked her life to satisfy her appetite for movement, and incurred a fine at the theatre for "travelling without leave."

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delighted herself scarcely less than she delighted her audiences, a part it was pure joy to play and pure joy to have witnessed and remember. Little wonder that the public cheered, little wonder that the poet shed his diamond tear.

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### IV.

In the summer of 1879 the Théâtre Français must close its doors for repairs, but its revenue must be kept up and the company must not be idle. The astute M. Perrin, was meditating where and how to employ them when there came overtures from Mr. John Hollingshead, the impresario of the Gaiety Theatre, a genial soul who knew his business from A to Z, whom to know was to like, and who would move as easily and be as popular in the *coulisses* of a Court Theatre as in the saloon of a dancing gaff at Wapping. M. Perrin boldly named his figure, which represented the average maximum of the Comédie, £1,600 a week, payable in advance. There was no haggling or hesitation.

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Hollingshead was out for a *coup*, closed with the terms, and it only remained to draw up the programme. An acute moment occurred when Sarah stipulated for a personal share in the profits, and for permission to recite at private houses, the latter agreeably with a contract she had privately made with Henry Jarrett, who later was associated with Abbey in her American tours. The share was agreed to without difficulty, but the permission to make money by private engagements was the subject of acrimonious discussion. The dignity of the Comédie, it was thought, might be impaired by such an innovation, especially if it extended to concerted performances, and the jealousy of other *Sociétaires* and *pensionnaires* might be aroused inasmuch as they would obviously not be in such demand or command such fees as Sarah. Eventually a compromise was

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reached. Artists might accept engagements to recite alone, but only with special official permission to play two or three together. This, like most compromises, was not wholly satisfactory, but it averted Sarah's threat not to accompany the expedition, and it produced great rivalry among London hostesses to secure, what was evidently to be, the lioness of the season. Lord Dudley at once telegraphed offering £400—then an unusually large figure\* if Sarah and Delaunay would give *Nuit d'Octobre*.

To the Directors of the Français the *Sociétaires* ranked only by seniority, and Sarah's name came more than half-way down among the "mesdames." The list, a galaxy of talent, was headed by Madeleine

\* Twenty years earlier, at the house of a wealthy patron of art, Mario and Grisi sang for a joint fee of £30.

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Brohan, perhaps the greatest "grande dame" who ever trod the boards, and rounded off by Jeanne Samary, on whose delicious lines Miss Marie Tempest might be thought to have modelled herself. It was an all-star company, but the British public had already selected the star they wanted to gaze on, and from the moment that—rather sick and very sorry for herself—Sarah set foot on Folkestone Pier, she was the cynosure of every eye, and the favourite theme of every conversation. She arrived on a damp and depressing evening of the day before Whitsun Day. The red carpet at Charing Cross station was not for the arrival of the Comédie Française, but for the departure of the Prince and Princess of Wales, who had travelled to Paris that very afternoon, and would not therefore be present when she should first salute the British public.

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Staunch republican though she was, the absence of these illustrious personages for the moment bitterly disappointed her.

There was then no luxurious hotel in London, and a house in Chester Square sheltered her for six weeks. Chester Square is, perhaps, the least exhilarating of the favoured places in Belgravia, but Sarah was neither indulgent nor quite accurate in describing it as a small square of sombre verdure with a black statue in the middle of it, and its horizon bounded by an ugly church.

The six weeks spent in London provides a strange record of generous gestures and kindly actions, engagements and excitements, of blazing triumphs and bitter attacks. Sarah was at once at her best and her worst. She received hundreds of letters which she never answered. (It must be admitted on her behalf that the type-

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writer was then unknown.) She accepted invitations, and at the last moment failed to appear, or disturbed all arrangements by preposterous unpunctuality.\* She appeared irresponsible and intractable. She overrode convention and brushed aside remonstrances.

She was bidden to Marlborough House, and with correctitude excused herself from an engagement to dine with Mr. Hamilton Aide, but two days earlier she had been with difficulty restrained from rejecting, without excuse, an invitation to a famous house to meet the Heir Apparent.

\* One of her first engagements was at the house of the octagenarian, Lady Combermere. A roomful of guests, packed in several ranks of gold chairs, awaited her for an hour. At last there was the sound of an arrival. Sarah was slowly and nonchalantly mounting the staircase, when from the landing her manager, who had begun to reckon with a cancellation of his fees, hurled an opprobrious epithet at her and, in tones which horrified those who were near enough to hear, bade her bestir herself.



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She was exquisite, but she was exasperating. The English, however, were proof against it all; they followed her, they mobbed her,\* they applauded her, they quoted her. They hung on every word she said in the theatre, they discussed everything she did—or was supposed to have done—outside it. They surrendered themselves to a charm they could not define, to a personality they could not fathom, to a language which for the most part they could not understand. And with all her waywardness and alleged insouciance she appreciated it intensely. It was as if she had stormed and taken a castle which was worth holding, and which she meant to occupy.

Years afterwards, and when she had

\* At the French bazaar in the Albert Hall even the Royal personages present enjoyed an unusual immunity from over pressing attention, so intense was the desire of the huge crowd to get a sight of—and possibly a word with—Sarah.

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visited this country a dozen times, she told the present writer that the British public was the most faithful and loyal in the world. She believed that if she were to go on a London stage, and her voice were to fail her, she would still receive a rousing reception in memory of the good work she had done. *Per contra*, as the years passed on and Nature took her toll, Paris was liable to become critical almost to cruelty, and to have scant indulgence for the first fault even of an old-established favourite.

Whatever the results of her future *tournées* on the receipts at particular places, it was to her London visits that she always looked forward with genuine pleasure.

London, of course, meant for her the playgoing public, for she herself went scarcely anywhere, and did not greatly enlarge her circle of personal friends. But in any theatre, whether in the metropolis

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or the provinces—and in later years at the huge Coliseum—she felt herself at home and in touch with her British audiences.

The story ran that when she accepted her first engagement at the gorgeous music hall, she stipulated there should be no performing animals in the programme. The alleged reason was that such an item would be derogatory \* to her; the real reason was that she detested the cruelty which she thought might be involved in the teaching of tricks. Animals had a very warm place in her heart and at her fireside. One could scarcely imagine Mme. Sarah without a hound stretched at her feet and

\* Tyrone Power wrote just then: "I may be driven to the Variety stage at last, in order to get clothing and food—but until I have no other resource I will not play on the same stage with trained fleas, performing pigs, and educated seals. I am an actor and an artist—not, perhaps, a very good one, but as good as I know how to be. Of course, the Varieties are well enough, in some ways; many actors, doubtless much abler than I, act in them: but—not for me, while I can help it."

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one or two others\* hard by. Quarantine eventually deprived her of them as traveling companions, but not until she had bought many on her travels and been obliged to leave them behind.

On the opening night of the Comédie at the Gaiety the second act of *Phédre* formed part of a triple bill, of which the other items were scenes from *Le Misanthrope* and *Les Precieuses Ridicules*.

There are perhaps few more severe trials for an actor than to reach his true level in one act of a drama, and Sarah's difficulty was increased in that, at the moment of her entrance, she had to rise to the heights of passion at a single bound. It was always said that Macready, in the *Merchant of Venice*, before rushing on the stage for

\* For little dogs she cared little, and she has been known to have lost interest in an animal because it was too well-behaved.

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the scene with Tubal, used to lash himself to the proper degree of fury by hanging on the rungs of a ladder and cursing the stage carpenters, to whom he would offer apologies of a substantial character after his exit. Sarah was perhaps never more a *traqueuse* than on this 4th of June. Three times she rouged her cheeks and blackened her eyelids, three times she sponged all off; she was sure she was too ugly; and she remembered she was too thin; she repeated to herself: "Vers mon cœur tout mon sang se retire; j'oublie en le voyant," and the word "*oublier*" reminded her that, brief though her scene would be, she was liable to forget her part. Finally, as she bent her head to receive the applause which greeted her appearance, she lost for one instant her artistic self-possession, and started on a note she had pitched too high, but had to retain through the whole scene. She suffered

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acutely, but then the very suffering made her acting the more intense. She wept real scorching tears.

She implored Hyppolite for the love which was consuming her, and the arms she stretched out to Mounet Sully writhed with sheer longing for his embrace. Her passion, which, with all its febrile force, never marred the purity of her diction, seemed to master—as it were—the last shred of her modesty, and when terrified at the effect that this guilty passion has provoked in Hyppolite, she strives to pull his sword from its sheath and plunge it into her own breast, she swooned back in real and absolute collapse. The excitement of the audience was such as is seldom seen in a London theatre. Something quite unusual—quite beyond any experience or expectation had occurred—something which might never occur again. They had read

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of Rachel, now they had seen Sarah, and Sarah had set every nerve and fibre in their bodies throbbing, and had held them spellbound. They insisted on seeing the actress again, and would take no refusal, although they were told she had been carried to her dressing-room, and when the curtain at last rose in reply to their demand and disclosed Sarah, half held up by Mounet Sully, they gave her an ovation which she admitted never faded from her memory. She had come and suddenly conquered, and she was sure the London first night was definitive for her future. During the season she played in *Hernani*, *Zaire*, *Andromache*, *Ruy Blas*, *Le Sphinx*, and *Jean Marie* with unvarying success, and constantly deepening the impression she had made, but it is doubtful if any subsequent audience ever rose to the same fever temperature as Sarah's passion

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induced when she first met London across the footlights.

It may be an open question how far box office returns are a test of merit, but they must be adduced as a proof of popularity. Sarah was indisputably and unmistakably the "draw." Of the forty-three performances which the Comédie gave, the eighteen in which she appeared produced an average of £534 for each occasion : the average when her name was not on the programme sank to £400.

Moreover, the guinea stall on Sarah's nights was often sold by *abonnés* for five times the amount.\*

For one *matinée* the *Etrangère* had been announced, with Sarah as Mrs. Clarkson.

\* The libraries were unwilling to "deal" for the visit of the French player, so Hollingshead appealed to his friends and patrons, and a sum sufficient to insure against any loss was banked at Coutts.



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The fixture at the last moment had to be cancelled and the audience, already seated, were offered a refund of their money back, tickets for another performance, or to remain and see *Tartuffe* played as it would be to perfection. Molière's masterpiece was no attractive substitute, and four-fifths of the "house" rose dejectedly from their places and streamed gloomily out into the June sunshine. The reason offered for the absentee was two-fold—the well-worn "sudden indisposition," and the fear of over fatigue in that she was to play *Hernani* the same evening. One excuse was an obvious "fake," the other suggested a bit of clumsy management.

The truth was—and it is perhaps a testimony to character—that Sarah detested the *rôle* of the crafty creole, and this apart from the fact that she was originally cast for the Duchess de Septmonts, and that

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she had once entirely forgotten to give the speech in which the "stranger" describes her very strange past. There were not many characters, however technically unsympathetic, from which she shrank, and some of her greatest successes were achieved with frankly wicked women. She would represent with equal exultation in her art the incestuous passion of Phédre, the sexless innocence of Joan, the austere sanctity of Thérèse.\* But Mrs. Clarkson, with all her graces and all her griefs, was a cat, and to cats, on or off the stage, in human form or otherwise, Sarah was antipathetic.

Fédore in the beginning of the third act is a purring tigress, but a tigress out for blood, and the narrow observer could see how gladly the actress put off the feline and put on the leonine when she has no

\* "Il faut voir Thérèse," Sarah said to Mr. Edmund Gosse, "C'est assomant, mais c'est grand."

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longer to seek her revenge by stealth but to applaud the punishment of her faithless lover.

From the great chorus of praise there was one dissentient voice. Matthew Arnold had his misgivings, but then Matthew Arnold could brook no rival to Rachel in his mind or memory. In his youth he had seen Rachel play Hermione at Edinburgh, had followed her to Paris, and for two months never missed one of her representations. Such devotion has its recompenses; it also has its prejudices and its penalties. "Temperament," he wrote, "and quick intelligence, passion, nervous mobility, grace, smile, voice, charm, poetry,—Mdlle. Sarah Bernhardt has them all. One watches her with pleasure, with admiration,—and yet not without a secret disquietude. Something is wanting, or, at least, not present in sufficient force; some-

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thing which alone can secure and fix her administration of all the charming gifts which she has, can alone keep them fresh, keep them sincere, save them from perils by caprice, perils by mannerism. That something is high intellectual power. It was here that Rachel was so great; she began, one says to oneself as one recalls her image and dwells upon it,—she began almost where Mlle. Sarah Bernhardt ends.”

If Matthew Arnold was not a thick-and-thin admirer of all and everything that Sarah did, he was wholly with her in the saying, which he places on her lips: “The theatre is irresistible—organise it.” The saying was incontestably sound, but on Sarah’s lips there might be a touch of mockery in it. She knew—no one better—the value of a society self-governing but State-supported (the only State-imposed

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condition being that classic plays should not always lie on dusty shelves) with a commissioner representative of the State, taking part in the councils of the theatre and stimulating every effort to retain a high place in public esteem. She knew that here the State has no concern for, no interest in, the theatre however important to national life, however salutary for national manners. Perhaps she knew instinctively that this detachment is—or was—due less to the apathy of the State than to the attitude of the British public—she had heard the doctrine of John Bull as to the mischief of State interference and the blessedness of leaving every man to do as he likes. But year in, year out, as she returned to the London she had learnt to love, and more especially as she saw in the school of dramatic art a pale and private attempt to vie with the public dignity

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of the Conservatoire to which she owed so much, she would repeat to all who murmured against the ineffective and go-as-you-please conditions of the theatre in England, "The theatre, if you will only give it a fair chance, is irresistible ;—organise it."

The season in London added largely to Sarah's fame, and at the same time convinced her that her commercial value was almost inestimable. Tempting offers to return to London, dazzling proposals to cross the Atlantic attracted and aggravated her ; she could accept none of them, or at any rate, turn none of them to her own advantage. She was not the mistress of her own life ; the Directors of the Français held her fast bound ; she must—she really must—be set free from the galling fetters, free to take her future into her own capable

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hands and shape it without restraint or restriction.

She returned to France with the Comédie, and at their reopening ceremony received—contrary to the gloomy forebodings of Perrin—a positive ovation. Then she scored a huge success, but secured no pecuniary benefit, on a brief visit to Holland; she came back to Paris and—some may think—rode for an artistic fall.

The opportunity soon arose. In March, 1880, Emile Augier's *L'Aventurière* was somewhat hurriedly put into rehearsal and Sarah was bidden to study Doña Clorinde. She developed sore throat; she was too unwell even to try on her costumes, she disliked the part, she thought the lines were bad poetry, and she told the author with some heat, what she thought of his work;

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rehearsals were too few, and too hurried ; she asked for delay, and it was refused. On the evening of the 17th April, she was irritable because she played, as she admitted, badly ; looked, as she thought, ugly,\* and the next morning, while Mlle. Barretta was lauded to the skies, Sarah had a very bad Press—one writer going so far as to say that her gestures suggested Zola's Virginie rather than Augier's Clorinde. "Vulgarity is the one fault I never have had and never shall have," Sarah retorted hotly. She probably felt no resentment when years later Bernard Shaw, criticising Mrs. Patrick Campbell's colourless reception of Von Keller in *Magda*, wrote : "How capitally vulgarly Sarah did that." But to be charged—and charged malevolently, with lack of refinement where refinement should be all necessary was a reproach

\* "Like an English teapot," she described herself.



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under which the *Sociétaire* of the Théâtre Français quivered with rage. She had brought about her fall, but it had hurt her more than she expected, and it is probable that its bruises never entirely disappeared. She read the journals and was angered more with those who gave purely conventional praise than with the more pungent criticisms. Anger, though she would not admit it—when does an angry woman admit she is angry?—guided her hand when she wrote without an hour's reflection to Perrin :

“ TO THE DIRECTOR :

“ You have compelled me to play when I was not ready.” (This was not quite accurate as at the last moment a brief respite was offered and refused, Sarah believing she would “ get through ” all right.) “ You have accorded me only eight

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rehearsals on the stage, and the play has only been rehearsed three times entirely. I was very unwilling to appear before the public. You insisted. What I foresaw has happened. The result has surpassed my anticipations. A critic pretended that I played *Virginie de L'Assommoir* instead of *Doña Clorinde de L'Aventurière*. May Augier and Zola absolve me. It is my first rebuff (*échec*) at the Comédie; I am determined it shall be my last. I warned you the day of the *répétition générale*. You have gone too far. I kept my word. By the time you receive this letter I shall have left Paris. Will you kindly accept my resignation?

“SARAH BERNHARDT.”

The letter was despatched, copies being sent at the same time to the *Figaro* and the *Gaulois*, so that there could be no going

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back, and she herself left Paris to be immune from all the officious advice and remonstrances which she knew would descend on her. She was free ; free to rove the world. She need render accounts to none but herself. She would reap the harvest of her own earnings.

But the cup was not without its bitter drop, for in all her vagaries and through all her vicissitudes the Théâtre Français, from which she was to be an exile, remained her spiritual home just because it was the sanctuary of her art.

“ Monseigneur,” she had murmured to the Heir of a great Throne, who, unknowing the conventions, had not uncovered in the *foyer*, “ Monseigneur, ici on n’ôte pas sa couronne—mais on ôte son chapeau.”

But if her secession from the seat of drama was to be regretted—as it was certainly resented—it had for its sequel a

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succession of triumphs won in plays in which beauty of *ensemble* appealed as strongly as the merits of her own part.

And if Sarah, like Madame Pierson and Madame Bartet, had remained to the end in the Temple of Classic Drama, the loss to the public at large would have been incalculable. True, we should have been spared Lena in the *Looking Glass*; we need not have mourned the loss of either *Frau Vedekind* or *Le Reveil*; we would have been willing to read Angelo instead of witnessing so cumbrous a melodrama; but *Fédora*, *Théodora*, *La Tosca*, *La Sorcière*, *Gismonda*, might never have been called into being, or at any rate would never have enjoyed such a tenure of life; Cleopatra and Elizabeth would not have died for us; Jeanne d'Arc's *La France re-naîtra* would not vibrate in our ears; Jeanne d'Orlé would never have pleaded for her

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unhappy son ; Sarah would certainly have been warned off *Hamlet* and would never have learnt *Lorenzaccio* ; the procession of Rostand's lyrics might have been robbed of much of their glory ; Princess Far-away might never have carried her crimson roses ; Izeyl would not have worn her orchid crown. And for his *Dame aux Camélias* Dumas would surely have looked in vain for a star to shine between La Doche and La Duse, and in sheer beauty to outshine them both. If on that April afternoon the Théâtre Français was impoverished, posterity was proportionately enriched.

The Directors of the Comédie, perturbed and angry, and perhaps feeling a little foolish, could invoke no law to stay Sarah's going. She would return to London, where a rapturous greeting awaited her ; she would visit Brussels, and play at the

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Monnaie, and go to Copenhagen, where the Danish Order of Merit was in store for her, and she would then accept the prodigious offer of Mr. Abbey and Mr. Jarrett and—having paid up the 100,000 francs fine imposed by the Théâtre Français \*—would sail for the United States.

\* She also had to forfeit upwards of 40,000 francs which she had deposited with the management.

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### V.

The first American tour differed little from those to follow, except that at the outset there was no little prejudice to overcome, and a good deal of calumny to dissipate. The visits to the United States and Canada were repeated many times ; there were constant additions to, and variations of, the repertoire, and for the sixth tour Coquelin himself was Sarah's colleague.\* But the first experience was always revived ; the reporters always clustered thickly, the rapturous receptions were always re-affirmed, the prices usually established fresh records, and the money

\* The seventh tour realised £40,000, though Sarah's refusal to bow to the American Theatre Trust necessitated performances in tents, tabernacles and skating rinks.

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always rushed through Sarah's open fingers. Her impresario, Mr. Abbey, had lost a considerable sum the previous year with an opera tour: he was determined to boom the actress to the utmost extent, so as to recoup himself no less than to exalt and enrich her. His methods were peculiar, and somewhat exhausting, and Jarrett, acting as Sarah's agent, powerfully backed them. For many years she had been accustomed to have the searchlights turned on her, and she did not shrink from publicity like Madame Bartet, who, during the thirty years she adorned the stage of the Théâtre Français, would never so much as allow her photograph to be shown in a shop window. But Sarah did enter an energetic protest against giving interviews of ten minutes each to thirty journalists in succession; she did resent having herself represented standing on an enormous whale and



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tearing out its bones with which to stiffen her corsets, and she did throw—or cause to be thrown—a jug of water on the heads of some specially enthusiastic representatives of local newspapers who disturbed her well-earned sleep by a well-meant early-morning serenade.

The tour opened at New York with *Adrienne Lecouvreur*,\* which, at first, did not seem a very happy choice. The heroine of the play does not appear until the second act, and when the curtain fell on the first, several people asked for their money back on the grounds that “La Bernhardt is not in every act.” She was awaited, it seemed, with impatience and curiosity rather than with friendly feelings, and to ensure a “reception,” Abbey and Jarrett had provided a “clacque”; but with the first

\* Twenty-five years later Sarah produced a version of *Adrienne* largely of her own drafting which was no improvement on Legouvé and Scribe.

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notes of her voice a current of sympathy was established between the audience and the actress; the recitation of *The Two Pigeons* worked its usual miracle; the fourth act was loudly applauded, and Adrienne's revolt against the Princesse de Bouillon roused the house to a frenzy of applause. At the end of the play there was a great manifestation, which was continued outside the Albemarle Hotel, where Sarah was lodging, and where she was compelled to appear again and again on the balcony to thank the very people whom she had expected to find lukewarm, even if not prejudiced against her.

Twenty-seven performances were given in New York, and for the last one before she went on tour—a *matinée*—50,000 people waited outside the theatre to catch a glimpse of the actress "in real life." She

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had to leave her carriage and walk for some distance to the stage door, shaking hands and signing scraps of paper which were thrust at her ; one energetic female admirer, wishing presumably to test her reality, drew out a large pair of scissors and tried to snip off a lock of hair, but only succeeded in cutting an expensive feather out of a Parisian hat.

The American journeys from the Gulf to Canada were regal in luxury of equipment, splendour of achievement and fervour of public adulation, and probably no artist has ever been equally, or so lavishly, fêted. The whole tour lasted seven months. Fifty cities were visited ; 156 representations were given ; "La Dame aux Camélias" proving herself easily the most popular, as she was the most pathetic, heroine.

Yet it was against this story of the modern Magdalen (in America renamed

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“ Camille ” \*) that religionists and modernists united to tilt, and to such an extent that on more than one occasion stones were actually thrown at Sarah, while her first entrance as Marguerite de Gauthier was sometimes greeted with organised coldness, which would surely melt as the more beautiful side of the bruised peach was gradually shown. Clergymen preached from the pulpits protesting that the French actress had been sent by the Old World to corrupt the New World, and that her art was an inspiration from hell. The Bishop of Montreal, holding forth generally against the immorality of French literature, forbade his flock to attend “ Bernhardt’s ” performances. The denun-

\* In 1880 Madame Modjeska played a version of Dumas’ play at the Court Theatre under the title of *Heartsease*, and a large number of young people were taken to see the piece, their parents being under the impression that it was based on Miss Charlotte Yonge’s highly moral novel.

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ciation of the Bishop of Chicago recoiled curiously on himself, as his preaching aroused so much interest in the prospective performance in his diocese that Abbey was able to send to the poor of Chicago \$200, which he would otherwise have spent in advertisement.

Sarah travelled the American continent in *quasi*-regal circumstances. According to her contract with Jarrett, she was to receive £200 for each performance, half the receipts in excess of £600 a performance, £40 a week for hotel bills, and a special Pullman car, with bedroom, drawing-room, four beds for her staff, and two cooks to prepare her meals.

The farewell *matinée* took place in New York early in May, and the piece, given by special request, *Princesse Georges*. The house was packed, and the audience made

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up largely of actors and actresses, painters, sculptors and authors. At the end of the play Salvini came on to the stage and offered a casket of Lapis. Mary Anderson, then in the first blush of her beauty, but already in the full swing of success, offered a small medal, bearing a forget-me-not in turquoise, and in her dressing-room Sarah could count over 130 bouquets. In the evening, by special request also, came the *Dame aux Camélias*, and after the final curtain the actress was recalled fifteen times to make her bow to a public she had altogether captivated.

In her estimate then and thereafter of the American public Sarah would oscillate between effusive eulogy and keen criticism, the latter, however, chiefly directed against the non-American element in America and such minor matters as the importunity of reporters, the unclean and over-busy hands

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of Custom House officials, and the pertinacity of Press agents. Her admiration for the nation as a whole, and for its women in particular, was unstinted—and Mr. Edison, who entertained her at supper at 3 a.m., she thought, had much in common with Napoleon ; no higher praise was in her vocabulary.

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### VI.

The American *tournée* whetted an appetite always keen for travel. Sarah must see as well as be seen. New faces and novel conditions were a constant stimulant, and not even the dangers and discomforts engendered by the war, nor the loss of a limb, could arrest the desire for movement which advancing years seemed to increase.

Her itinerary was wide, and distance was never prohibitive, but one country was invariably struck out of any programme proposed to her. Germany had invaded France, had humiliated her, and had brutally torn fair territories from her side. For over twenty years the Paris Opera House closed its doors to Wagner; for



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nearly twice that period Sarah declined to cross the German frontier.

At Copenhagen, in 1880, she was the cause of great trouble at a banquet organised in her honour after a command performance. The Director of the Danish theatre had spoken tactfully; the French Minister had replied gracefully; the proceedings would have ended harmoniously, when the representative of Germany, one Baron Magnus, pompously proposed the toast of "France, who gives us such great artists, France, whom we all love so much."

Sarah had already refused an offering of flowers from the Baron, and had begged an English *attaché* to ask him to desist from any attentions; the foolish bit of oratory was too much for her sense of patriotism; she sprang to her feet and cried: "Yes, let us drink to France, but if you please,

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M. l'Ambassadeur de Prusse, to the whole of France." The band struck up the *Marseillaise*, the 300 guests dispersed in discomfort; the French Minister begged his compatriot to apologise in writing, and Sarah herself recognised that she had been unintentionally sensational and theatrical, and, perhaps, had unduly wounded a well-meaning but clumsy diplomat.

For thirty years she was deaf to all suggestions from her friends as to the success she would obtain in Germany, to solid offers from managers who vied with one another to overcome her resistance. She would not soil her hands—the hands which Victor Hugo had kissed—with German money.

German ears had waxed too gross for her tones. She would pour nothing into them, and they should have nothing of

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her. But in the flux of time the surrender at Sedan and the documents signed at Ferrières became a little blurred. A generation had passed away. Bismarck and Moltke, and those who intrigued with the one and fought under the other, were no more, and in 1908 Sarah yielded to a very diplomatically couched offer and travelled to Berlin. She knew that there would be no roses in her path ; that her refusals had been deeply resented up and down the country, and by no one more than the Emperor himself, and that those who intended to witness her performance were entrenching themselves against her seduction ; but she scarcely counted on the drab demeanour which her first audiences adopted. She had chosen *Fédora* as the vehicle with which she would be the most likely to rush the position. She expected no reception, and received none, when the

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Russian princess hurries to the apartment of her lover; Fédora's torture of anxiety, her agony when the stricken man is brought back and she is shut out by the doctors from the operation they have to perform; the frenzied beating on the window when she believes the assassin will escape—all scenes in which she had stirred to enthusiasm peoples of every climate—were received with icy silence. Many an artist would have been numbed in such an atmosphere. Not so Sarah; it was a duel between her and the hostile folk across the footlights, and she must win. She had yet one great chance before the close of the act, and she took it. When the door opens and the doctor summons the woman who is widow before she is wife to the deathbed, the pathos of her look of enquiry, the dumb agony—more eloquent than any torrent of words—the gestures so slight, so simple,

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but which betokened that a woman's heart was being torn out of her breast, the movement, graceful even in its despair, towards the recess where lay the corpse of the man who had wholly possessed her, and the "Vladimir, Vladimir," a wail which might have broken a heart of stone, were too much even for Teuton obstinacy. As the curtain fell, a fat German rose up in his place and shouted: "Whatever else she may be, she is the greatest artist we have seen." The infection carried like lightning, and within ten seconds the house was a mass of cheering men and women, whose love of acting overbore their hostility to an actress who for years had flouted them.

Three days after Sarah's return from New York Victorien Sardou called upon her with the manuscript of *Fédora* in his

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pocket. He had fashioned the story of the Russian princess to exploit Sarah, as surely as Bizet composed *Carmen* to suit Galli-Marié. Sardou had studied his subject closely in all her plays ; he believed he had the measure alike of her range and her technique, and he laid himself out to test them both. In a homely phrase, which scarcely admits translation, he opined that *Fédora* would exhaust all the resources of the actress. " C'est un rôle très, très dur," Sarah herself admitted in later life, when commenting to me on the courage of a young English actress in attacking it. Dramatists are not perhaps always the most correct judges of what their interpreters can or cannot do. Sarah not only gave to Sardou's complex heroine a wealth of detail beyond the playwright's conception, but she left it possible for Madame Duse to add one or two subtle

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touches \* which she was herself quick to commend.

And next after *Fédora*, both in time and—as Sarah declared—in merit, came *Théodora*, and after *Théodora*, *La Tosca*, produced at the Porte St. Martin in 1887, which the following year at His Majesty's Theatre was to arrest all London. Sarah was now in her forty-fifth year, and yet the *Stage* could say on this occasion, “She has never looked more youthful, more tender, more passionate and more bewitching,” and, recalling the scene in which Scarpia, finely played by Pierre Berton, expiates his infamy, one might add “or more terrible.”

It was in the high fever of this scene

\* When *Fédora* takes from her bosom the little phial, Duse made believe for a moment that the stopper would not come out, thus suggesting a super agony in that she would be unable to swallow the poison before Loris Ipanoff should prevent her.

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on the first night that Sarah showed herself a cool mistress of resource. Floria is "laying out" the dead body of the chief of police. She must take down from the wall a crucifix, and place it on the breast she has stabbed. The crucifix has been so firmly fastened as to resist altogether her effort to detach it. She desisted from the attempt and, as if moved by a sudden impulse, came down the stage, looked on the face of the monster she had sent to his doom, looked back to the silver Christ, and then hissed, like the cut of a whip, "*Pourtant, il ne le mérite pas !*" Sardou himself could have suggested no more subtle business.

And after the experienced playwright came the young poet to sound the higher and lovelier note in a beautiful organ, to reawaken the poetry which had been



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allowed to slumber awhile. Rostand, who, if he had just missed his mark with Musardises, had more than made good with *Romanesques*, was now to offer Sarah his wonderful wares—*Princesse Lointaine*, *La Samaritaine*, *L'Aiglon*, *La Gloire*, and not least, *Roxane*.\* For those who witnessed her rendering of that rather pale heroine, agreed that never was her dramatic sense more successfully—because so delicately—enlisted. For many “leading ladies” the temptation would have been great to enlarge and colour, if not to step outside, a rôle which is distinctly and designedly of secondary interest.

Here the temptation, if it occurred, must have been wholly rejected. She was Roxane with all, but no more than, the

\* In order to heighten the attraction of *L'Aiglon* and *Cyrano* on tour, Coquelin consented to play Flambeau in the former ; Sarah was more than willing to be Roxane in the latter.

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minutiæ the author himself would approve ; but never for a moment, or by the measure of a grain, at the expense of the hero on whom the main interest was focussed.

To Sardou, easily first among dramatic "carpenters," and to Rostand, steeped in romance—but alert in all that concerned his business—Sarah freely admitted her immense debt of gratitude. If she alone could faultlessly interpret all that they wrote, they in turn were unsparing, and unfailing, in pains to feed her art with the choicest fare. Without Sarah much less than full justice might have been done to Sardou and Rostand, but without Sardou and Rostand, Sarah would not have enjoyed many of her richest moments. And besides the creatures of the classic writers and Sardou and Rostand, there is grouped on our memory a crowd of figures,

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dramatic, romantic, poetic, mediæval and modern, rich in design, exquisite in detail, all adding to the edifice of fame which the actress was building, pile upon pile, till the end.

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### VII.

And so the years rolled on, and there was scarcely a year in which she did not reach some new level, discover and distribute some new dramatic treasures, and form the theme of some new dramatic discussion. And with the passage of time, those who touched her life with any frequency, or watched it with any closeness, saw it mellow and without any relaxation of energy, grow softer and more equable. Sarah had always been delightful, but she had sometimes been very difficult ; she had always done great things, but she had often kept folk waiting an unconscionable time until she chose to do them ; she had always been generous, but she had not always been quite just, especially to her-

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self; she had been radiant with light, but she had been sadly shaken by storms, often of her own brewing. But even before she had reached her prime, she had done much to set herself in order. Where she had kept the world waiting—often out of sheer caprice—she would now be punctual for every engagement; her correspondence, which was very large and very various, and which formerly she had tossed aside, would now be methodically dealt with. She was accessible where she had been inapproachable; she was quiet where she had been restless; her word given on any matter, was sure to be exactly kept.\*

\* An instance which can be multiplied largely may be quoted. In the summer of 1898, a performance had been arranged at the house of the Duchess of Newcastle in aid of a children's hospital in which the then Duchess of York was deeply interested. Some weeks earlier in Paris, Sarah had promised a friend that she would recite during the afternoon. A few days before the occasion,

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She seemed to realise that her country looked to her in some sense as an ambassadress, whose special mission was to remind the world that France is set for its enlightenment, and not merely for its amusement ; her very fame had imposed upon her responsibility ; there was a definite duty to be done.

And the steadier mind was reflected in the amazing output of work which could only have been accomplished by a careful organisation of all her resources. Impulse may have been sometimes her motive power, method was her mainstay, and concentration the key to it all.

her friend saw an announcement that Sarah Bernhardt would give a *matinée* on that date at a suburban theatre. He repaired to her and reminded her of her promise. Without further ado she cancelled her *matinée*—which had been arranged by her manager—accepted the pecuniary loss entailed rather than fail in her word to help sick children, and not only recited, but gave a one-act play, for their benefit.

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For many years she had passed—it would be unfair to say she posed—as the spoilt daughter of Fortune, as capriciousness incarnate, as a creature of whims and moods. In point of fact her whole artistic life became as carefully ordered as if she had taken the vows. Professional zeal induced almost cloistral notions of professional discipline. Slackness and letting things slide were abhorrent to her. Herself she kept girthed for every occasion and braced for every opportunity, and the full service she exacted from those about her was matched by the willingness to spend every ounce of her own powers in the same service.

In any play produced by her—and she was always her own producer—it was evident that the phrasing and gestures and costume of each member of her troupe, had been as carefully considered and were

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considered as important as her own. Every part was accorded its full value, and every artist was enjoined and encouraged to play it for all it was worth. The players were there for the play, not the play for the players ; it was the work, and not the workman, which was the matter of cardinal importance. "Never play a part," said Mrs. Kendal the other day to a rising young actor, "unless you feel the part is going to take a great deal out of you." The word of advice might almost have been Sarah's own *mot d'ordre*. The parts which exhausted her were the parts which pleased her ; the greater the demand on her, the better and the more willing the response. It was sheer hard work which filled and ennobled her life, and whatever enhanced its quality must be considered, whatever hampered or hindered it must be thrust aside.



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Wide in outlook, the theatre was the sum and centre of her interests, her true and perpetual home. Day in, day out, she would often cross its threshold before noon and remain within its doors for twelve or fourteen hours, of which every moment was occupied to the full. The afternoon, if there were no *matinée*, would be devoted to rehearsal, or spent in reading the manuscripts, not only of certificated authors, but of blushing poets and budding dramatists, in timely preparation for prospective plays, in interviews with designers of costume, of whose craft she had little to learn, with scenic painters, who were often her pupils,\* or with candidates eager to be enrolled in her company.

\* Sarah was a pioneer in the matter of coloured foot-lights, now an everyday process. When she took the Comedy Theatre from Sir Charles Hawtrey—a comedian, by the way, whose talent she held in high esteem—she ordered pink gauze to be stretched across the *rampe*, which bathed the stage in rosy effulgence. The lessor

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The frugal *déjeuner* and the simple dinner—she was abstemious to a fault—would be taken in her dressing-room, with no relief of silence, and with little interruption of the flow of business, which would be instantly resumed after a four hours' performance, when every nerve would have been alive, every tone of voice called into play, so that every audience might receive of her best. One of the first to arrive, the "directress" was always the last to leave the scene of action on which, except in her own room, darkness had already fallen, with vitality even now scarcely lowered, still careless of repose, and regarding the day's work which was over chiefly valuable as the predecessor of the day's work to come.

was greatly struck with the result, and continued the practice until the day when the material was torn away by the rough hand of the County Council, and condemned as inflammable.

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She was, in military parlance, a born leader, and, like a good general on the battlefield, was always to be found where the flag flew at established head quarters ; always accessible, always available, calm in counsel, prompt in action, rich in resource.

It was a day of unremitting toil, but the toil was sweet, and if the strain was intense and unceasing, each successive effort surely brought its own spasm of delight. Fatigue found no lodgement in her body, just as failure no place in her thought.

When well past three score and ten, she set out to fulfil an engagement at Madrid, where she arrived after a journey of twenty-six hours, to be received at the station by a cohort of journalists, artists and admirers. She reached her hotel at midnight, declined rest or refreshment, preferring to wait until

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her grandson, M. Verneuil, should return from the theatre two hours later, when she entertained him at supper and regaled him with all the news of Paris until four o'clock, regardless of the fact that a heavy rehearsal and a strenuous performance was to be the day's programme.

She learnt many things—sculpture, painting, even music—far less for themselves than because the lessons were of great value to her own art. Thus many people will perfect themselves in a language by learning another from it. Teach an English child Italian from French and not from English: the pupil is forced to think in French, and if the Italian is afterwards forgotten, the French will endure. Sarah's sculpture had probably little real merit, her painting less, and her music was negligible, but the music—as Madame

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Albani notes—increased her sense of rhythm and gave her the perfected control of breathing, as necessary for elocution as for singing. The practice with pencil and brush prompted many a decision as to *mise en scène*, while assuredly the knowledge of sculpture must be reckoned with in emphasising Sarah's power to convey a world of meaning, not only with movement of head and hands, but with every turn and twist of the sinuous body. Who, for instance, that ever saw it can forget the "exit" of La Tosca; who has ever succeeded in representing anything like it? Triumph, hatred, hope, fear, every feeling except remorse, seemed to course through Sarah's willowy frame as she drew it slowly from view—clinging so closely to the door as to seem as if she passed round it, rather than through the doorway.

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To speak of Sarah Bernhardt is for some people to induce an otiose comparison between her and Rachel, whom scarcely any of us,\* Ristori, whom many of us, and Duse, whom most of us have seen. The comparison is, moreover, the less useful, because, while the majority of an educated audience have a working knowledge of French, it is only for a select few to appreciate at its full value the text of Italian plays. Each of them may well have a claim to superiority over the others on some one or other point. A perusal of

\* General Sir George Higginson writes to me under date of 1st June, 1923: "I first saw Rachel in Paris, when I was an Eton boy, and was passing my Easter holidays in 1841 with my people in that then rather dreary city. I can see Rachel now in the well-known scene in *Les Horaces*, where she denounces the Romans. 'Voir le dernier Roman à son dernier soupir moi seul en être la cause et mourir de plaisir.' Nothing I have ever heard since made me shiver so with appreciation. I once heard her in comedy; it was a failure. Her majestic figure and features could never relax into an attractive smile. I saw her some years later, probably in 1852; she had lost none of her power."

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Ristori's *Studies and Memoirs* shows that her high dramatic instinct was matched with a keen intellectual study—truly remarkable in the child of strolling players—in respect of which she was probably ahead of any of her sister artists. Macready, who knew what he was talking about, and had no prejudice—French and Italian being, moreover, almost equally unfamiliar to him—pronounced Ristori's acting to be not nearly so good as that of Rachel, at the same time allotting her a place some way beneath Mrs. Siddons. In 1855, Ristori made her first official visit to Paris. Her coming was a cause of annoyance to Rachel, and partizanship ran so high that playgoers fought at the gallery doors over the respective merits of the two actresses, Rachel's advocates inevitably securing a victory. The champions of Sarah and Duse have been no less definite in their

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opinion, and by a general consensus—in which Sarah herself joined—a special mark has always been awarded to the latter for a peculiar delicacy of expression, for strangely subtle phrasing, and for a total absence of what, from lack of a better word, one may term “*cabotinage*.” But Duse’s niche in the temple of fame must in history sink to a lower level than Sarah’s, because high tragedy seems outside the compass of her powers. The masterpieces of poetry in which Sarah excelled have so far eluded her. Her claim has been staked in a region midway between high comedy and high tragedy—in the important, but lesser territory, exploited by such moderns as Ibsen, d’Annunzio and Pinero. And when the two met on common ground, as in *Fédora* or the *Femme de Claude*, it was Sarah, not Duse, the tragedienne, not the emotional actress, who imparted the elec-



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tric shock. If one passes over Aimée Desclée and Ellen Terry, Rachel alone will always remain for consideration, and she alone may in the future be pronounced to be Sarah's compeer. The careers of Rachel and Bernhardt were historically co-incidental in many respects. In the veins of both flowed the blood which distinguishes so many great artists. Both shone with special lustre in the classic masterpieces. Both penetrated to the innermost recesses of their heroines, and their heroines had the great tragic virtue of mattering personally and acutely to every one in the theatre, and if once you admitted their departure from the recognised code of morals, they always presented an overwhelmingly strong case. Both glorified Racine, and both attained their histrionic apogee in *Phédre*. Both also figured heroically in French revolutionary and mili-

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tary crises. In justice to Rachel it must be remembered that her brief career was always a desperate race with time, while Sarah had time altogether on her side, and for this, if for no other reason, before the mighty sum of her total achievements, the glory of Rachel must necessarily pale.

It seems unnecessary—although it has been often attempted—to prosecute a comparison between the two into their personal character and private lives, but one may remind oneself that Sarah would never have walked out of the house when Ristori was making her *début* in Paris ; she would never have hissed the performance of a supposed rival ; she would never have been the heroine of the story of Achille Fould and the guitar, and if she had played at cards—which she never did,—she would certainly not have cheated.

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## VIII.

Of her many colleagues, Sarah placed highest Mounet Sully in her earlier days, and later Lucien Guitry and Gabrielle Rejane.

For diction pure and simple, she would point to Mme. Bartet and Mlle. Reichemberg. Their pronunciation, she declared, was not only faultless, but infallible, and she would send any young friends who wished to study elocution to learn from one of these unrivalled exponents of it.\*

\* Last year, Sarah was engaged on a treatise on elocution, which has not, I think, yet been published. It opened with some very practical observations (I quote from the *Figaro*):

“La prononciation est une des qualités primordiales de l’art de dire.

“Certes, la volonté est le plus sûr facteur dans tous les actes de la vie, mais il faut aussi compter avec les imperfections physiques: une machoire un peu large

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Both had been her companions at the Théâtre Français, and widely as the paths of the three had differed afterwards, they had remained close friends. Of Guitry she spoke—and spoke often—as a rare instance of a great artist who was also a great actor. Irving,\* she told the present writer, was far from a great actor, but perhaps the greatest artist in the world. Coquelin, on

donne l'essor aux mots ; un palais profond donne plus de sonorité qu'un palais plat : les dents serrées les unes contre les autres empêchent le sifflement, tandis que, tout au contraire, les dents écartées le stimulent.

“L'artiste doit, alors, chercher tous les moyens possibles pour combattre ces petites tares. Il en est que l'on peut atténuer. Exemple : Je connais une artiste qui jouait de grands rôles dramatiques, et dont les dents, trop distantes les unes des autres, donnaient à sa diction un sifflement strident, enervant à entendre. Je lui donnai le conseil de mettre, en se maquillant, un peu de cire rose à l'intérieur de sa mâchoire inférieure. Ce moyen réussit parfaitement et, quant je l'entendis, il y a quelques années, après l'avoir perdue de vue pendant le long mois, elle me dit qu'elle avait continué ce petit maquillage intérieur, et qu'elle ne pouvait plus s'en passer, même à la ville. L'artiste qui prononce bien se fera toujours entendre, et, par cela même, comprendre.”

\*“Irving,” she wrote, “a été pour le théâtre anglais

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the other hand, she considered as a comedian almost without a peer, but not in its wider sense as a great artist.

Lucien Guitry was the model whom she suggested to all young artists, urging them to watch his every movement and catch his every intonation, reminding them that it was often the infinite pains which he took over a particular phrase which went far to light up the whole play. Rejane and Guitry, she insisted, were emotional in precisely the right sense, and could provoke tears and laughter apparently with perfect ease—really, after infinite study.

It was in the summer of 1882, and in London, that Sarah first played with

*a qu' Antoine était pour le théâtre français, le poteau indicateur d'une nouvelle route. Mais l'Anglais transportait son public vers le passé dans une magnificence de recherche et d'idéal, tandis que l'autre l'arrêtait au seuil du réalisme et le forçait à pénétrer dans le labyrinthe des passions humaine."*

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Guitry, for whom it must have been a day full of incident. In the morning he had made Mlle. Pontjést his wife, with Sarah as witness to the contract.\* In the afternoon there was a hectic rehearsal of *Hernani*, and in the evening he scored a signal success which was rapturously applauded, and was happily not marred by a strange bit of negligence on the part of the property manager. In the celebrated scene of the portraits it was suddenly discovered there were no portraits on the wall, and it was only thanks to the young actor's presence of mind in grasping an album of photographs that Ruy Gomez could present his ancestors to Don Carlos.

Sarah's judgment on a play or performance was always clear, sympathetic and wholly independent, and she had a

\* Thirty-seven years later, Sarah was witness to the marriage of Monsieur Sacha Guitry to Mlle. Yvonne Printemps.

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quick eye for merit which had not entirely revealed itself. She always prided herself on having been one of the first to recognise Guitry's full worth, and to foresee his fine future. She and Dumas had begged that he might be released in 1881 from his military service in order to play Armand to her Marguerite, but the General then in command was deaf to their entreaties, although they pleaded with all the eloquence at their command the sacred cause of art—M. Angelo, who had toured America with her, being the not very satisfactory substitute.

“Go and hear Sarah say the letter she knows by heart in the last act of the *Dame aux Camélias*. It will be an object lesson to you how to sustain the voice in the minor key.” This was once the advice of the renowned Mme. Marchesi to a pupil whom she was training for grand opera.

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Sarcey, who in 1881 had finally become a whole-hearted admirer where he had been a lukewarm critic, spoke of certain passages in the play as miniature poems in prose, which Sarah chose as vehicles for her most musical efforts. "She sighed rather than said them, and the sound as it reached one's ears was like that of distant chant."

He accused Sarah, however, of having taken a liberty with the text, a charge which she admitted to be true. "Dumas is in America," she said, "I cannot ask his consent; I must take my chance of his approval." The elimination was made in the speech in the third act, when Marguerite tells Nichette of her new and idyllic existence with her lover. The sentence ran: "Par moment, j'oublie ce que j'ai été, et le moi d'autrefois se sépare tellement du moi d'aujourd'hui, qu'il en résulte deux femmes distinctes, et que la seconde se souvient à



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peine de la première. Quand, vêtue d'une robe blanche, couverte d'un grand chapeau de paille, portant sur mon bras la pelisse qui doit me garantir de la fraîcheur du soir, je monte avec Armand dans le bateau que nous laissons aller à la dérive et qui s'arrête tout seul sous les saules de l'île prochaine, nul ne se doute, pas même moi, que cette ombre blanche est Marguerite Gautier."

Sarah thought that "portant sur mon bras la pelisse" was so little picturesque as to belittle the beauty of the impression she thought to make, and that the three words "de l'île prochaine" both marred the rhythm and blurred the imagery of "tout seul sous les saules." She challenged him to hear her speak the two versions, and the critic reluctantly, but unhesitatingly, gave his verdict for her.

But if the actress made one of her very rare departures from the text at this point,

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*per contra* in order to give their precise value to the author's lines, she departed from precedent at another point in the death scene. One minute before this occurs Marguerite, buoyed up by the sight and touch of her lover, says " Je ne souffre plus, on dirait que la vie rentre en moi ; mais je vais vivre. Ah, que je me sens bien." Instead of sinking back on a couch, and there expiring in the hitherto accepted manner, Sarah, to give emphasis to the suggestion of a sudden spasm of vitality, stood bolt upright, drew in a great breath as though in defiance of death, and then, as if cut down by a swift stroke, fell headlong to the ground, gaining as she fell, the most graceful and picturesque pose a dead woman could possibly assume.\*

\* In later years, although preserving the character of the fall, she would use Armand's outstretched hand to break it.

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Mme. Doche, by the way, who created the part, resented Sarcey's criticism—which was really an appreciation—that she had played the character as that of a courtesan. How could she play it otherwise? Marguerite Gautier was nothing other, and both La Doche and La Bernhardt played her as such, but the difference in the two renderings was that the latter was able to read into the character just the grain of poetry which, so to speak, leavened the whole woman.

Of the three principal parts in the play on which I have allowed myself to linger again for a moment, it may be said that the heroine is a courtesan by profession, the hero a cad in his conduct, and Père Duval the heaviest father armed with the flimsiest plea who ever made his stage entrance. Yet few would dispute the judgment of Sarcey—although he was see-

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ing the piece in London after it had received the fussy attentions of the Lord Chamberlain—that *La Dame aux Camélias* may take its place as the *chef d'œuvre* of Dumas *filis*.

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### IX.

Absorbed as she was in all that concerned her profession, the actress kept herself in steady touch with all that was being played on the larger stage of politics. She delighted in receiving and talking with men versed in public affairs, and had her lot been differently cast would have revelled in a *salon*. She read the newspapers regularly and closely, skimming the gossip, but studying the larger events. She was a pronounced and fervid Republican, largely because she was convinced that a Republic was the only form of government suitable for France, and what was the best for France must surely—she would argue—be good elsewhere. The Third Republic she would unhesitatingly say was the most

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serious and stable Government in Europe, and she would endorse the dictum that it is no evidence of lightmindness or lack of judgment if Frenchmen have been forward to express their preference for the republican form of government by dying for it on the barricades. Communism and anarchy, which she had tasted, were bitter in her mouth, but she carried her Republicanism to the edge, though not across the border, of Socialism. Her idea of Socialism was probably somewhat vague, and would suggest an infinite opportunity for every one to be happy. If only she could rule the world, she would say, the world should be a paradise. Pain and poverty should be banished—pleasure and sunshine should be permanent—beauty should be everywhere.

If Socialism be, as it has been defined, a state of society in which things are held

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or used in common, Sarah, as far as her personal estate was concerned, was a Socialist in practice if not in precept.

The money she earned was distributed or ear-marked almost before it was made. Expenditure, which was scarcely ever less than extravagant, generosity which was profusion itself, disregard of cost in the theatre which went to the edge of recklessness, the open purse which she entrusted to those she loved and too freely trusted, told their tale and forbade the actress—even when the evening of her life was closing—to exchange the obligations of the stage life for a free place “on the breezy common of humanity.”

Her Republicanism in no way conflicted with her reverence for historical traditions or for august personages with whom she was brought in contact. In almost every capital in Europe she was

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presented to the Sovereign or ruling Prince, and she frankly admitted—and to the dismay of the Equerry inscribed in the book reserved for the most illustrious folk and offered for her signature only—that “*le plus beau jour de ma vie*” was the occasion on which she was summoned to play before Queen Victoria at Nice. But of all the illustrious personages with whom she came in contact, one figure appealed to her perpetually and irresistibly. In far-off days she had been presented at Copenhagen to the then Princess of Wales. She spoke of her at the time as of having blinded her to everybody else present, and the friendship—for in spite of the social straits which lay between them, it was little else—extended to her by Queen Alexandra was admittedly one of the happiest items in her life.



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Of the catastrophic incidents which marked Sarah's more agitated years, it is difficult not to make, at least, bare allusion to the episode of her girlhood—brief in duration, and bitter in experience, yet clothing her with the maternity which filled all her life and sweetened all her work. And what other reason than uncontrolled temperament can one give—she gave it herself—for the hasty marriage with the ex-diplomat, the Greek subject who made himself an actor so as to try and gain Sarah's affection ; who worked on all that was irritable and excitable in her, from whom she parted almost as soon as they were man and wife, but whom she never neglected—or allowed to be neglected—

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even when the morphia fiend had become his fast friend.

Like many women whose lives could scarcely be described as domestic, she was devoted to young people, and her own young people showed her a devotion not always accorded even to parents who possess every domestic virtue. Her two grand-daughters came to live with her when they were quite young. Their education was her constant care, and especially did she do everything to encourage and extract every artistic tendency. The elder of them exhibited some little gift for poetry. To encourage her, Sarah would learn the child's verses by heart, and occasionally, when opportunity served, recite them in public. All the return, for all the care she lavished on them, she asked was that they would confide in her absolutely. One of the little girls shyly concealed from "ma

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Great," as they called her, that she was endeavouring to write a little play. Sarah discovered the effort, and chided her gently for not letting her into the secret of the industry. With them, as with herself, the one thing she would not tolerate was idleness. Never let your hands be unoccupied or your mind empty for a moment; work she would say is the sweetest thing in the world, and the completion of one task should only be the beginning of another. One of them always accompanied her on her long motor drives across France, Holland, Belgium, and Switzerland. She urged them to let nothing they passed escape their notice, to question her on every point, and to store up memories of what they had seen which would help them in the future.

When away from them, whatever her engagements, she would never fail in constant correspondence with them, never

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“ writing down ” to them, but always aiming to awake any artistic propensity which might be latent in them. In the fever of one of her most successful visits to New York she could write :

“ Ma Lysiane, je suis heureuse de te savoir au beau soleil et surtout dans cette ambiance de beauté qui enveloppe toute l'Italie. Comme tu es avec cette délicieuse Dudeck, tu pourras apprécier avec plus de charme et de profondeur ce que tu vois. Je regrette que ce ne soit pas moi qui ai la joie de te soulever le Voile mystérieux de l'infiniment beau, mais j'aime à penser que c'est un esprit supérieur et délicat qui va l'initier. Prends beaucoup dans tes yeux graves, dans ton esprit, et retiens ; car c'est dans la lumière des belles choses que l'âme se baigne et rebaigne avec le plus de constance. Fais bien attention de ne pas

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prendre froid dans les églises et les musées. Mets ta fourrure à ton cou. Le soir, sur le petit balcon de Dudeck guette les soleils couchants, ils doivent être admirables ; dessine un peu ce que tu vois dans ce jardin de poésie. Regarde le grand écran de noirs sapins, regarde le petit bassin vieillot et charmant.

“Ecris-mois tes impressions toujours à la même adresse : 1555 Broadway, New-York.

“Mon séjour ici a été admirable, et jamais le succès n'a été plus triomphant pour moi. Je pense souvent à ton père, à toi, à votre demeure, et mon cœur s'envole d'une traite vers vous ; je pense aussi à ma panne petite disparue, et les larmes me printent aux yeux ; pense à Ilce souvent, ma chérie, elle l'aimait tant. Envoie lui tes pensées joyeuses et tristes, elle prendra tout avec bonheur et pense aussi à La

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Great qui l'aime et qui attend avec impatience le moment de te voir sauter sur son lit dans un grand bonjour brutal et charmant.

“Ce sera pour Belle-Isle !

“Dis à Dudeck que je l'embrasse tendrement, et si la princesse est là, dis lui que mon souvenir va vers elle !

“Je te serre sur mon cœur  
Great.”

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### X.

In December, 1896, not long before she reconstituted the Théâtre National, and endowed it with her own name, the leaders of the literary and artistic world gave a banquet in honour of Sarah, and crowned her with picturesque ceremonial as Queen of the Drama—François Coppée and Edmond Rostand being among those who composed and delivered poems dedicated to her. This recognition by her colleagues of her high place in the sphere of art was balm to her soul, and went far to atone for what was curiously lacking on the part of the Government. For seventeen years were yet to pass before the much coveted Legion of Honour, which public opinion had long since awarded, was officially bestowed.

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Then, on January 16th, 1914, the President of the Republic paid an official visit to the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt, witnessed her performance of *Jeanne Dore*, conveyed the insignia to the actress, and invited her to a State reception at Elysée. France thus crowned her famous daughter, and crowned her in an hour pregnant with strife. Six months later the pistol of Austria was pointed to Serbia, and Germany's resolute finger was on the trigger.

Utter devotion to country was ingrained in Sarah; she was patriot no less than artist, and it thrilled her to learn she was on the list of those whom the Kaiser would demand as hostages as soon as he should have battered down the doors of Paris. This knowledge only spurred her to activity which neither age nor accident could restrain.



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She took her three score years and ten very lightly—her exuberant vitality even now prevented her from being spoken of in the past tense—but in the first month of the Great War she was to be sorely stricken. As she advanced in life, her various stage falls, which occurred in almost every play, became more and more difficult, until at last, in Hamlet's death scene, she seriously injured one of her knees. The accident took place just before embarking from New York. During the voyage the pain became intense, and Sarah asked the ship's surgeon to relieve it. That functionary exhibited such unclean hands, and brandished such obviously unsterilised instruments, that she peremptorily dismissed him from her presence, and determined to await her arrival in Paris for surgical aid. But with a momentary relief from suffering she decided that

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she would not allow any interference with the engagements she had booked ahead, and postponed the treatment which she hoped might, after all, not prove necessary. The delay was disastrous, and resulted in a condition which necessitated the amputation of her leg. The operation took place at Bordeaux in 1915, and the surgeons did not neglect to warn her of its gravity. But the woman who to the last suffered spasms of stage fright, and trembled in every limb before a *Répétition Générale*, was dauntless in physical courage. "A toute à l'heure, mes enfants, à toute à l'heure," she cried to her grand-daughters, as she was carried from her room in the hospital to the operating theatre.

The mere shock of the operation would usually have been sufficient to keep a woman of her age under the doctor's

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immediate orders for some considerable time. But Sarah was not as other women. A superb constitution and sheer pluck combined to accelerate her recovery, and from her bed she was busy with her plans. True, she could no longer walk, and unaided she would be unable to stand. But she remembered there were plays in which she could remain seated, or be propped up on her feet, recitations would present no difficulty, and even more important, there was always a *chaise à porteurs* in which she could be borne to the lines to play, as she had promised, to the *poilus*. She would take her life in her hands again and start afresh ; maimed, but not disabled ; hurt, but not hindered from going forward. Her first engagement is to redeem her promise to go to the front. She travels to the soldiers' billets, and beyond. She acts, she recites, with all the

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former fire and fervour, and plays to groups of men as if she were playing at the Théâtre Français. Then she would like to go right up to the firing line. The general consents, but at a certain point he says that he cannot let her go without him, and that if he goes further with her his uniform will be spotted and draw the enemy's fire. "Alors," said Sarah to her bearers, "reculez-moi. La France a besoin de tous ses Généraux."

The pull on her purse strings is as strong as ever, and to replenish her purse she must face all that an Atlantic voyage means,\* and sail for the United States. America has not yet made war; so far she has only made money. And Sarah needs

\* On her return journey from America, early in 1918, the submarines were very busy, and there was an hour of great alarm and much agitation among the passengers. Sarah, who was made fully aware of the danger, remained quietly in her cabin, totally absorbed in a game of dominoes with her grand-daughter.

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money—not for herself, but for her work and for the war-worn soldiers who are never out of her thoughts. But this particular journey was postponed, and when Sarah played in New York in 1917, she was playing not to neutrals, but—as she loved to say—to stout allies, who were already afield to avenge the insult to their own flag, and to drive an invader from the fair lands he had foully despoiled.

“ Je vous en prie, My Lord, donnez-moi l'autorisation de partir par Boulogne. Le voyage par le Havre est une véritable torture. Je sais que ce que je demande est très difficile ; mais je sais aussi que cela est possible si votre grâce le veut bien.

“ Quand même, my Lord, je vous serais

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très reconnaissante pour l'effort que vous voudrez bien faire.

“ SARAH BERNHARDT,  
“ Savoy Hotel.”

So ran the letter—itself so highly perfumed as to cause some consternation in the corridors of the War Office—addressed by Madame Sarah Bernhardt to Lord Kitchener. The private secretary was at once commissioned to tell the veteran actress that if she persisted in her wish official permission would be forthcoming, but a corollary was added to the message, to the effect that the Folkestone-Boulogne route was then very hazardous, as enemy craft were busy in the Channel. For all answer, Sarah said : “ Mais alors c'est une question de mourir avec les soldats. Quelle gloire ! ”

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Sarah had been in London for an engagement at the Coliseum, which was crowded night after night to hear her recite her part in Eugene Morande's dramatic poem *Les Cathédrales*. Here she was seated, or rather enthroned, as Strasbourg Cathedral, on a pedestal far back on the east stage. She remained almost motionless; a slight uplifting of the hands was the only gesture; but there was all the old vehemence of utterance, all the perfection of phrasing, the outbursts of passion, the tears in the voice. "Pleure, pleure, Allemagne; l'aigle Allemand est tombé dans le Rhin," was the refrain, and the ringing tones rang true in prophecy, though then it was France who was weeping in her misery while Germany was exulting in her infamy.

*Les Cathédrales* gave way to a one-act piece, *Du Théâtre au Champ d'Honneur*,

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written by a French officer, and founded on a real episode which occurred on the French front. Sarah played—a veritable *tour de force*—the part of the young soldier who had been an actor, and from whose lips his comrades are never tired of hearing the *Prayer for our Enemies*; a poem which supplicated the Divine Judge to mete out just punishment to those who had stretched Belgium on the rack, had violated women and murdered helpless children. When the curtain rose, Marc Bertrand, a young French soldier, is lying on the ground, slowly regaining consciousness. It is the early morning, and during the previous day the Germans had fought furiously for the possession of the wood hard by. The boy is badly wounded, but all his thoughts are for the flag which he was clutching when he was shot down. How did it happen? Slowly it comes back to him



that his colonel and his comrade were killed, and that soon afterwards his own father, proudly bearing the regimental colour, fell also. A German had sprung forward, but only to find Bertrand standing ready to defend the flag and avenge his father's death. The German was thrust back, mortally wounded, and Bertrand recovered the flag. He remembers this, but no more. At the sound of footsteps he grasps his revolver, but it is an English officer who comes forward and offers the parched and bleeding boy his water-bottle. He has heard of the young Frenchman who has come from the stage to the trenches, and has heard also of the prayer, which he asks him to repeat. The boy begins :

“ Vous qui recompensez, dit-on, le sacrifice,  
Vous qui savez peser et juger l'ideal  
Dont un peuple se fait le lige et le feal,

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Vous qui ne voulez pas que l'innocent  
patisse,  
Vous devant qui l'orgueil du mal n'est  
pas permis,  
Lorsque pour nous ainsi que pour nos  
ennemis  
Nous entendons sonner l'heure de la  
justice,  
Vous qui voyez, Seigneur, leur âme  
jusqu'au fond,  
Ne leur pardonnez pas . . . ils savent ce  
qu'ils font.

Ils ont souillé de sang les pages de  
l'histoire ;  
Trahissant les serments, déchirant les  
traités.  
Ils ont fait reculer d'un bond l'humanité  
Jusqu'au seuil oublié des heures les plus  
noires,  
Et lorsqu'ils se sont efforcés, en un sublime effort,

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Un peuple au deshonneur a préféré la  
mort,

Ils l'ont crucifié sans fremir, dans sa  
gloire.

Vous qui voyez, Seigneur, leur âme  
jusqu'au fond,

Ne leur pardonnez pas, ils savent ce  
qu'ils font."

In the latter stanza, Sarah's voice seemed to have regained not only all its former beauty, but, by what must have been a great effort, all its former vibrant force. From the second line the voice rose higher and higher, to halt and break down into a sob on the "un peuple a préféré la mort," and in the last line, when voicing France's prayer for vengeance, the tones became a rapid staccato, with a biting accent on the initial consonants, and the "they know what they do," was hurled out in frenzied insistence. In the last stanza the

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voice sank as if overcome by weakness,  
but every syllable cut across the house :

“ Abreuvez-les de pleurs. Faites que rien  
n'efface

L'horreur du crime dont palpite l'univers;  
Doublez pour eux les maux dont nous  
avons souffert,

Frappez-les, O Seigneur, d'une main  
jamais lasse,

Jusqu'au jour où, pour délivrer l'hu-  
manité

Votre juste vengeance, en sa sure équité,  
Du monde pour jamais abolira leur race !  
Vous qui voyez, Seigneur, leur âme  
jusqu'au fond,

Ne leur pardonnez pas, ils savent ce  
qu'ils font.”

The Englishman is awe-struck by the agony  
of the prayer, and sees that Bertrand is  
growing weaker. A dog belonging to the  
Red Cross Society comes up, and the

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soldier gives him his blood-stained handkerchief and cap to carry to the nearest ambulance. Soon the stretcher-bearers arrive, but Bertrand refuses to leave without his flag. He is dying fast now, but in a flash he remembers that he hid it in the trunk of a tree close by; the tattered colour is brought, his fingers clutch it, and he can now die with honour. With a last effort he raises himself to hold it up, murmuring *Déroulède's* lines :

“ Porte-drapeau, mon camarade !  
Au combat comme à la parade  
Ton chemin est le droit chemin.  
C'est un fier poste que ton grade !  
Porte-drapeau, mon camarade,  
Tu tiens la France dans ta main.”

It is all over ; the young soldier-actor has played his last part ; the British officer uncovers : “ *Vive l'Angleterre !* ” “ *Vive la France !* ”

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“Ne leur pardonnez pas,” a terrible cry—more terrible even than Réjane’s *Carillon* ; a terrible appeal to Eternal Justice, and from Sarah’s lips it seemed as if the very soul of a people were athirst for vengeance. And then with the recovery of the emblem of France the cry for vengeance changed into a cry of ecstasy, and, finally, with the whispered “La France” ecstasy died down into peace. Victory was sure and Eternal Wisdom would judge.

Less than two years before her death was Sarah’s last visit to the London she loved. She had planned a tour in the provinces, which a railway strike forbade. She travelled by car as usual from Paris to Boulogne; the car broke down, and

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she had to spend most of the night on the road. She reached the Savoy Hotel after a bad crossing, in apparently a state of collapse. Two hours later, however, she was at rehearsal, and on the following day startled even those whom she had ceased to startle by a remarkable impersonation of Daniel, the love-sick youth in *Monsieur Verneuil's* play, who seeks to drown disappointment in drugs. Sarah did not appear till the second act, immediately before which she was carried on to the stage, and did not come back to her dressing-room until the final curtain fell. There were a few lines of comedy delivered with delicious humour; there were lines expressing loathing of the morphia which had enslaved its victim; there was the whole pitiful story, only relieved by intense pathos; there was a make-up which really produced a young man diseased and

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disabled, but with flashes of virile vitality ; there were all the resources of technique which forbade the audience to remember that the actress could not stand unsupported, and could not move at all ; there was a death scene, which for pure beauty has seldom been bettered ; and all this from a veteran who was nearer eighty than seventy years old.

And during the last days in the country where her welcome was always sure, and was now more loyal than ever, when children were taken to the Prince's Theatre, where they would hear little and understand less, so that hereafter they might say they had seen Sarah, there came a great joy. The leading actresses of London, themselves led by Mrs. Kendal, Miss Terry and Lady Tree, approached their wonderful elder sister in art, and begged her to accept, in the form of an album of autographs, an



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earnest of their homage and their gratitude to one who, year in year out, had held high the standard of the drama and had been herself the very symbol of dramatic art.

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### XI.

“ Altesse Royale, je mourrai en scène ;  
c'est mon champ de bataille.”

It was a hot July evening in London. Sarah had rehearsed all the morning, she had played *La Tosca* in the afternoon, and at night had given by special request *Fédora* in the presence of the Duchess of Teck,\* a great devotee of the theatre, before whom all artists delighted to act. At the end of the performance the Princess talked long with the actress ; she could tell her of Mlle. Rachel at Windsor Castle, she herself had also seen Rachel play Adrienne Le Couvreur, and had thought the great tragedienne very wonderful, but curiously

\* Mother to Queen Mary.

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lacking in charm ; she could tell her—which pleased Sarah greatly—that Queen Victoria had spoken with enthusiasm of the command performance at Nice, and with regret of having so long postponed the pleasure of seeing her—and then in graceful phrase the Princess asked if Madame Sarah were not worn out after such a day's work.

“ Altesse Royale,” was the answer, with head thrown back, and in accents which bore no trace of fatigue, “ je mourrai en scène ; c'est mon champ de bataille.”

And surely it would have been her choice that death should come to her without wait or warning, as in the long past days she thought it would have come in *Zaire*—come in all the fullness of her fame and in the place where she reigned supreme. “ Un beau soir mourrez sur la scène dans un grand cri tragique,” Jules Lemaître said to her when the laurels were just beginning

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to cluster on her brow. " Mourir en scène " —the words were often on her lips, and they were not to be very far short of fulfilment.

In the summer of 1922, Lucien Guitry asked Sarah if she would play with him in the *Sujet de Roman*, the four-act piece which his son had just completed. She would have none of the fatigue of production, physical difficulties were not prohibitive, she would remain seated during the whole act in which she was dominant, there would be no great demand on her emotional, and none on her declamatory, powers, but all the grace of her exquisitely feminine art would be in high relief. Sarah accepted with delight ; it was delightful in itself to gather up the threads of comradeship with Guitry ; the part pleased her greatly ; that it was a part of secondary

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importance did not weigh a straw in her calculations. Everything went well ; the miniature theatre lent itself to the delicate story ; success was sure ; the *Première* was for the 19th of December with the *Répétition Générale* on the previous evening. All the afternoon of the 18th Sarah had spent in the theatre, and she preferred to remain quietly there while the others went to dine before the *Répétition*. Then, in Monsieur Sacha Guitry's room, which he had arranged for her use, just an hour before the three knocks should have been given, came the swift, sharp stroke which, in a moment, laid her low. Doctors were hurriedly summoned ; the news spread like wildfire that Sarah was suddenly and grievously ill ; journalists trooped in to try and learn exactly what had happened ; the *Répétition* was cancelled, and the *Première* indefinitely postponed. But stage curtains might rise

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and fall, Sarah would never again be found behind them.

She had always wished that there should be no long evening of life spent away from the theatre where she all her life had spent everything ; she was not to be denied, for in truth on that December evening the agony had begun. For three months she was to endure, fighting with pain, powerless against the inroads of an illness which were not to be stemmed. There were periods of comparative relief when, with all the old energy, she set her mind on the work which she still asked her tired body to accomplish ; there were her personal affairs to set in order ; there was the question of renewal of the lease of the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt ; there was a new production which she hoped against hope she might live to see ; there was the keen interest in

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the play—no less keen because she herself would play no part in it.\* “Tu me pardonnes,” she had said to Sacha Guitry as soon as she recovered consciousness. “Te faire perdre tant d’argent ! Toi que j’aime tant.” Day by day Sacha Guitry and his wife would come, or sometimes Lucien, to bring the last word from the theatre—and always the manuscript of the play, which had meant so much to her, would be by her side, and she would wistfully murmur some of the lines. And when the theatre eluded her grasp, there was the film ; she could still be carried down to the studio, and lend something of her wealth of experience, of her sense of art, of her grace of gesture, to the picture which would be her last record ; and all this until the

\* When the play was produced with Mme. Rogers to supply the vacancy, Sarah would time the moment when her part should begin, raise herself in bed and speak the lines of it herself.

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morning when the bearers of her couch came to her room to be told "Madame ne peut pas travailler," and to know that if the work were over, there was left to the worker but a few hours of life. It was time to "cease upon the midnight without pain."

The golden voice was hushed, but the smile had not faded, for those who were very close—for the friends who stole in one by one to look upon the woman who had never swerved in her friendship, nor failed her friend. It was all very still, and in the silence there came the priest to give the Holy Sacrament which would speed the wayfarer on the last of her journeys; to whisper of the love of the Sacred Heart. And through the long March day the crowds outside the house waited as crowds wait without the Palace gates when Sovereigns lie locked with death; waited patiently with no enquiry, which they knew would



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be vain—waited until, under the evening shadows, the old servant came to tell them what they could read in his face that his own long service of love was over.

A sovereign spirit had fled away. She who had been entitled *Reine d' Attitudes et Princesse des Gestes* was lying in her purple, shrouded in the lilac blossoms of which at the last she had murmured to her son.

“ I know not that if all things had been equally beautiful we could have received the idea of beauty at all, or if we had, certainly it had become a matter of indifference to us, and of little thought, whereas through the beneficent ordaining of degrees in its manifestation, the hearts of men are stirred by its occasional occurrence in its noblest form, and all their energies are awakened in the pursuit of it,

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and endeavour to arrest it or re-create it for themselves.”

So wrote Ruskin, and surely in the last lines lies the keynote of the career of the woman whose genius lighted her path to fame, who revered her art as a sacred trust, and made every faculty she possessed the pliant instrument of a resolute will. Surely all Sarah's energies were constantly awake in the pursuit of the beauty which was her ideal, and after which she strove with all her strength and all her soul alike with passion and with purpose.

Beauty has been said to stand on a high hill—and many roads lead up it. Sarah did not always choose the safest—and seemed little concerned to choose the easiest paths, but she kept the summit steadily in view, and in the long climb there was no hesitation—no looking back. She never faltered in the ascent, nor went

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aside to rest. There may have been clouds of dust to soil her robes, and there must have been many a mist of tears. A thousand faults beset her; none of them blinded her view of her object, or stifled the silver notes, or hindered her from her calling. And of all that she saw and gathered on her road she gave freely and largely, with generous impulse, with something like fine recklessness, with too little thought of the morrow, with still less thought of herself. She spared nothing, reserved nothing, shrank from nothing. The long journey is over and a way-worn traveller is at rest. But a great artist—perhaps the greatest whom three generations have looked upon—has passed into the Grand Peut-être, and who will grudge if in the end she has her lodging

“Where, in that land of beauty,  
All things of beauty meet”?

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“Il fait un beau printemps; il y aura beaucoup de fleurs.” Sarah had murmured a few days before she fell asleep. Flowers had always been to her the badge of beauty; they had been her constant companions; they were always the offerings she cherished the most. Now in streaming glory they poured in to do her homage; flowers fashioned into works of art, flowers cast down in reckless profusion, only because she was known to have loved them; the rarest exotics and the simplest blooms. Flowers in quantities marked the solemn requiem when Westminster Cathedral was thronged to the doors, when the British sovereign caused himself to be represented—a gesture which, assuredly, France will never forget—when Ambassadors, Ministers of the Crown and famous soldiers and sailors joined in salute with all who are great in English literature and art.

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And in Paris, on that Maundy Thursday, the progress from the Boulevard Pereire to Père La Chaise was something of a floral pageant; at every step the wealth of blossom grew in weight and beauty, and flowers heaped high were the pyramid crowning the tomb on which had been carved the all-sufficing word "BERNHARDT."

[illegible]